

Summary: Harry defeated Voldemort at a price he doesn't yet understand. He wasn't certain he would survive the final battle and so wasn't terribly concerned about any price he had to pay... But he DOES survive and he wakes up to find himself in another dimension where Neville is the boy-who-lived and Harry is... A HUFFLEPUFF! What?

This is my very first chapter ever! I hope you enjoy.

(btw, this isn't beta read, so forgive me if I missed anything. I do try to make sure there are little to no errors, but if you find one, point it out to me and I'll try to correct it.)

Chapter 1: A Necessary Prologue

Harry could hardly see for all the rain clouding his vision. Flashes of light, from wands and sky sent men falling and thunder rolling. There was too much going on around him, like he was moving in slow motion, everything else was happening too fast. Water and sweat and mud and smoke, the smells of the battle seeped into his robes. He could hardly think through the pain in his scar; it meant He was close, and that soon, everything would be over. One of them would die here today. One of them would finally be able to live.

The Order and several ministry aurors had been fighting for hours against an army of giants, dementors, and Death Eaters. It was utter chaos. Magic electrified the air making it difficult to breathe, to move, to think. Several wizards had simply stopped fighting only to laugh as though they had gone mad, so elated were they by the magical currents swirling around them. They were quickly swallowed by death not long after.

There was a strange scent to the air, like the coming of a great wind and the temperatures rose and fell with the movement of the dementors. Mists of silvery patronus charms set a fog upon the battle field, distorting sight, but also driving away the cold sorrow.

For a moment it felt as though the ministry and the Order fighters were pushing back the Death Eaters, but then from out of nowhere a flanking army of wizards descended upon the battle, throwing curses and growling like animals. At the first howl, a shiver of fear spread like fire along the resisting aurors, and though it was not the full moon, a panic took hold. It was not only the bite wizards feared. A

werewolf possessed impossible strength and had an innate resistance to most offensive magic. Only those that bore silver were spared a violent death.

It had taken a taxing amount of magic, but this war would be finished once and for all. Harry had finally breached the internal wards. There would be no apparating out of here, no portkeys, and no escaping by floo. All escape was warded against or, in case of the floo network, shutdown temporarily. The only way out was to fly or run, but the chances of evading every fired curse was very small.

Harry's heart thrummed deeply in his chest. This was the end, he could feel it, in his blood and in his magic. As he prepared to blast the door to the stronghold from its hinges, it swung open and out of the entryway came a death eater, blood trailing from beneath his dark robes. Harry held his wand, a curse on his lips, but before the spell was cast, the figure fell hard to the ground.

The hood had slipped just enough to see a shock of white blond hair, but it seemed to be matted with blood. Harry knew instantly who lay at his feet.

"Malfoy?" Harry said quietly, his voice betraying no emotion. A few years ago, Harry might have sneered down at his school rival and made a snide comment. Now, though, he believed he could understand the young Slytherin, why he had chosen to take the mark, and any hatred Harry had felt towards him was replaced with pity. The blond would no doubt despise him for it if he knew, but judging by the rate of blood he was losing, he would likely never find out.

"Potter," was the choked reply. There was a fit of heavy coughing and after a long pause for breath the young man continued in an almost casual tone that was ruined only by his harsh breathing, "Have you come to kill him?"

"I have," Harry answered. He recognized the signs of the Cruciatus Curse immediately. But it was more than that, Harry could see. Draco Malfoy had been beaten harshly, and something about him felt disgusting, like hot tar pouring down his throat, something vile had happened, and Harry felt sick.

"Kill him." The blond managed to pull himself up to lean against the doorframe, "You kill him, Potter, and kill him dead." Those piercing grey eyes looked up at him with so much emotion, hatred, respect, fear, and dare he think hope, "Don't let him come back this time."

"It will end." Harry promised.

"Oh," a cold voice interrupted the two, "it will end of course." From the doorway stepped the Dark Lord, his cloak slowly becoming wet with rain as he stepped regally over the fallen Malfoy. "This battle will end with your death!" The declaration almost made Harry want to roll his eyes.

"I've heard that enough times not to take it seriously,"

"Avada Kedavra!" Voldemort hissed. Harry dodged the green bolt and returned with a blasting curse followed by a disarming charm. Both of which failed. Harry however was not overly worried. This casting was mostly for show anyhow.

Curses flew back and forth, and one had yet to find its intended target. The fact that Voldemort feared death more than anything and because of the large age gap, Harry was at a slight advantage. The Dark Lord was being overly cautious, and Harry had quicker reflexes. Voldemort may know far more spells than Harry, but they were useless if they couldn't land. The seeker position he held for six years had greatly improved his dodging skills. It was Moody, the real Moody, who had taught him that a duel was as much physical as it was magical. And it had been Snape who had taught him that a duel was as much mental as it was physical.

The rain made spell casting near impossible. Harry was sure that his accuracy was off its mark at least fifty percent of the time, and Voldemort was fairing no better. With all of the slipping and sliding through the mud trying to dodge curses, Harry was covered from head to toe in water and dirt.

Soon, the dueling pair abandoned using true spells, both knowing that wands and words were only a hindrance at this point. No longer was casting useful; a battle of imagination and wills began. Harry's magic was warm and bright, the color of summer sun and leaves, of a light breeze and shade under a canopy of trees. It grew slowly but steadily, building upon itself and rising like a tide. In contrast,

Voldemort's magic was disgusting, slick dark oil, corrupted and misused; there was no oxygen, no life, and no will within it. It did not grow, but it seemed to spread like an infectious disease, attempting to overwhelm and bury everything around it. It tried to seep into Harry's magic, trying to suffocate it, but it burned hot like the sun when the two forces met.

"You cannot kill me." Another flare of powerful magic pressed against Harry's and heat threatened to scorch them both. The rain near them evaporated into steam, causing a light fog to surround them, smelling of sulfur, making it difficult to breathe. It was without warning that Draco hurled himself at the Dark Lord. Angrily, his pale fingers dug themselves into sallow skin and black robes, tearing and scratching.

"Kill him, Harry!" the blond clung stubbornly to the Dark Lord in a flight of passionate hate, but his eyes were resigned. Harry knew that Draco had been hurt in a horrifying way, but he was still strong, and for the first time, Harry felt compassion for his school rival. They would save each other, he decided, there were too many deaths already. He was tired of people dying for him, and Draco Malfoy was no exception.

It was time, Harry knew, to reveal his trump card. He did not particularly like using this power, because it was not something he could really control, and its use often had unwanted consequences. In order to defeat Voldemort, however, it would be necessary. Draco's diversion had given Harry just enough time to perform the summoning.

Harry called on the earth beneath him, and the water and wind above him. The ground began to tremble and the storm picked up violently. Already he knew this summoning could potentially kill him, but unlike Voldemort, he was not afraid to die. He could give his life to the world if it meant saving it. Finally, he called on the fire from the lightning branching through the dark sky. He would need to summon all of the cardinal elements to vanquish Voldemort from existence.

"My heart, my life, I lend, and I ask only for the destruction of my enemy who is also your enemy, I do not bid you, nor do I claim your power as my own. I cannot accomplish this on my own, and I ask as a friend, as an ally, that you help me." The muddied ground began

to snake around his ankles, ice freezing his hair and stiffening his robes. "My heart, and my life, I would give, to see our enemy fall, one who corrupts you and bends his will over you for purposes not permitted." Voldemort managed to throw Draco off of him, and as he cast a killing curse towards the body of his no longer loyal servant, a bolt of lightning struck the ground between them. Thunder followed immediately throwing back the two bodies like dolls. The energy rippled through the ground and the wind came heavily, charged with magic and electricity.

The dark wizard screamed over the thunder, but anything he might have said was lost to the wind as it howled in its anger. The world tore the Dark Lord asunder, and Harry could no longer stand under the power, heavy and suffocating as it was, his only choice to give or perish beneath the weight.

Harry didn't know when it was that Voldemort passed, but as the storm cleared and the wind died down to a gentle breeze, Harry knew the battle was over. He and the wild magic had won, and he had somehow survived the storm.

He lay quietly on the soft ground, eyes unfocused, and his breaths slow and shallow. He could not feel his limbs or anything for that matter. He could barely think beyond a simple 'it's over.' All around him, the only thing he was fully aware of was the wild magic's presence lazily washing over his mind.

"What do you wish?" said a menagerie of voices, like a gentle hand across his brow. Harry tried to focus on the voices, but they escaped his mental grasp. Harsh, and gentle, warm and cold, all things and nothing, the voice purred like a wildcat in his ear. "What do you wish?" again it whispered, of freedom and life.

Wish? Harry thought, My only wish, was to have a chance at living a normal life, but I cannot forget... so many other's I wanted to save, so many people who also deserve what I selfishly crave. His body suddenly felt heavy, his limbs felt made of lead, and his eyes finally closed as he drifted off into unconsciousness.

"Granted." The magic hummed, pleased.

(So I realized that I forgot my disclaimer... er... it is hard for me to say... well not really, but I OWN NOTHING! All HP characters belong to JKR.)

Thankyou for the reviews! I like hearing what you have to say.

now on with the story...

Chapter 2: A New World.

Harry felt a fire burning through his veins and he was shocked awake by the sudden pain. He sat up quickly, his eyes wide. Without his glasses, he was virtually blind, but even with his poor eyesight, he could recognize where he was. He was at Hogwarts, in the hospital wing. What was strange, however, was that Madame Pomfrey was not already rushing out of her office to mother him.

Harry found his glasses on the bedside table and slipped them on. They were not the same pair of glasses he had been wearing the last time he had been conscious, in fact they were much thinner than his old ones. No one had ever bothered to get him new ones until now, but they felt comfortable enough and most importantly, he could see.

It was stranger still, Harry thought, that the hospital wing was void of any sort of letters or gifts, not that he particularly minded, but he had just defeated the most dangerous dark wizard in all of Britain, and he would have thought most everyone would appreciate what he had done for their freedom. Did they not want him, now that he had finally fulfilled his destiny?

But that was ridiculous, of course. They would not simply abandon him, right?

Harry pulled off the lightweight comforter and slid his legs off the side of the bed. He was fully dressed in a Hogwarts school uniform, which was also strange, but he shrugged it off. Standing on his own proved to be far more difficult than he thought, and his knees buckled.

"Bother," Harry sat tiredly on his knees and leaned back against the bed to catch his breath.

"Mr. Potter, what do you think you are doing on the floor?" Madame Pomfrey looked peeved and Harry stared up at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Well... I thought I'd go for a walk, but I don't think I can manage just yet."

"Come now Mr. Potter, get up." The nurse folded her arms and tapped a foot impatiently. Harry looked at her warily for a moment, unfamiliar with this sort of treatment. He stayed silent, and used the side table to pull himself up. His whole body shook with the effort, and Madame Pomfrey watched him skeptically.

"Is there something wrong?" Harry sat back on the bed heavily. He could hardly keep his eyes open.

"Enough theatrics, Mr. Potter, you are healthy enough to go." Harry stared at her incredulously this time, wondering if this was not truly Madame Pomfrey. She had never let him go early, and she had almost always made him stay longer than necessary.

"Are you feeling alright ma'am?" Harry felt for his wand but did not feel it anywhere on his person. He looked over where his glasses were and did not see it. "Where is my wand?" He dug a hand under the pillow, but found nothing. With renewed energy he threw off the covers and all but leapt off the bed. He looked underneath the furniture, but it was no where. "Accio my wand!" Harry rasped, his magic reaching and grasping nothing. He stood and made his way for the doors but collapsed to the floor about halfway. Panic gripped him, and he tried accio a second time.

"What has gotten into you Mr. Potter?" the nurse bustled over to him and tried to help him calm down. She gripped his arm, but before anything else happened, Harry slapped her hands away and wandlessly cast a stinging hex. She flinched and was about to stun him when he slumped to the floor so that he lay on his side staring at her with such animosity she had never seen in a child.

Running her wand over his small frame, her eyes widened when he showed severe magical depletion. That the boy was still able to breath was astounding.

"Harry Potter, do not move. You cannot afford to use anymore magic. If you can't calm down, I will have to stun you. I'm going to put you to bed, and you are not to move a millimeter until your magical levels return to normal." Something in the boy's eyes changed, from panic and distrust to confusion and relief.

"I don't think I could... even if I wanted to."

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Sun from one of the large windows in the hospital wing found its way over to Harry's bed, shining like a heat lamp over his skin. He slung an arm over his face to protect his eyes, but he was still hot, so he kicked off the covers. Blissful cold air settled over his bare legs, and it was then he realized that he was in one of the hospital gowns, the ones held on by ties in the back. Beneath the flimsy gown he was wearing nothing. Luckily no one else was present in the ward, and Harry was able to salvage his dignity. Yawning, he sat up and stretched, looking around with blurry vision. The room was just as he remembered it, except far more empty than he was used to. Everything was quiet, and for once Harry felt at peace, knowing his responsibility was lifted. For once, he could relax. Maybe he would venture out to find Ron or Hermione, or at least find Remus and make sure everyone was okay. He slipped out of the bed and put on the new thinner framed glasses.

Madame Pomfrey came charging into the room but stopped in her tracks just as Harry was making for an escape. He looked properly admonished when he discovered she had caught him. But she was not nearly as angry as she would have been normally. She decided there was something off about this boy, his body was held stiffly, as though he thought an attack might come at any moment, and his eyes looked as old and bright as the headmasters.

"Sorry." Harry tugged self consciously on his gown.

"Get back in bed Mr. Potter. I will have someone bring you a clean set of robes, and if everything seems to be in order, you will be able to leave.

"Sure thing." He grumbled and climbed back into the bed.

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No one had come to see Harry, and it was then that he decided something was off. Hermione should have been running through those doors to see him the moment he regained consciousness, then Ron and Ginny would follow not far behind. Why had no one come to see him? Had something happened to them? Harry felt the beginnings of a panic attack start to overwhelm him, and he tried to compensate by taking deep breaths.

Just then the door to the hospital wing opened and a young boy strode in carrying a stack of books and a set of robes. He was a short boy, maybe fourteen, with sandy brown hair and light brown eyes. He wore a Hufflepuff uniform, which confused Harry a bit, so when the boy stopped in front of his bed he didn't know what to say.

"I brought you some clothes and your homework from Friday and today."

"What day is it?"

"Monday," the boy replied, a bit of irritation leaking into his tone, "This is your Care of Magical Creatures homework, and there was an essay in Defense about the unforgivable curses," the boy shuddered at this, "and in Herbology, professor Sprout is having us study Bubotubers. So you best read the section on them before class next Monday. She is also having us choose a plant to study starting next week, so..."

"Wait... wait, I can't have home work, I..." Harry looked at the stack of books. They were all fourth year level books anyway. What was going on?

"I can't believe you had to be stuck in the hospital wing for three days because of those blast ender skewers."

"You mean blast ended skrewts," Harry said absently, "Can I ask... well, just humor me for a second. What is the exact date? And um, could you tell me your name." The boy just looked at him as though he were incompetent. It was the same look Petunia would use when he missed a spot or failed to trim the bushes correctly, or just because he simply existed.

"It is September fifth, nineteen ninety four, it is Monday, and my name is Wayne Hopkins, I'm your dorm mate. Did you get hit in the head or something?"

"No, that can't be right. I'm... you're a Hufflepuff first of all," Harry glanced down at his robes, and to his dismay there was a black and gold tie and a Hufflepuff badge.

"Potter... wake up. You've always been a Hufflepuff." Wayne rolled his eyes, "You know... it is people like you who make Hufflepuff look so awful." Harry was about to respond with a well placed, wandless hex but halted when Madame Pomfrey presented her own wand to run a diagnostic check.

"Well, Mr. Potter, your magical levels are back to normal. You may get dressed and leave. It should be about time for dinner, and you could probably use the nutrition."

"Thank you ma'am," Harry jumped out of the bed and pulled the curtains closed so he could change out of the flimsy hospital gown. Wayne was waiting for him and they left the hospital wing together.

"We are studying in the Library after dinner. So if you need help with any of the new assignments, you can just ask any of us."

"Er... thanks." Harry's mind was racing. He was back in fourth year and as a Hufflepuff no less. Something was very wrong here. But then Harry's thoughts paused. If it was 1994, that meant Dumbledore was still alive. That meant Cedric and Sirius and so many others were also still alive. "Listen, Wayne, thanks for all your help, but I really need to see the Headmaster. I'll see you at dinner, or later in the library, okay?"

"Do you need me to show you the way?" Wayne sounded tired and annoyed, if not completely irritated at the thought of having to show him where the Headmaster's office was.

"I think I can handle it." Harry resisted the temptation to curse the boy and instead made a bee line for Dumbledore's office. Once he arrived at the statue of the gargoyle he began shouting different sweets at random until the statue moved aside. Once up the staircase, Harry knocked on the door reluctantly. Emotions threatened to overwhelm him.

"Come in, Mr. Potter." Harry choked back a sob at the sound of the old wizard's voice. It sounded different to his ears, only subtly. That he had not said his first name had been a heavy blow to his heart, but Harry steeled himself for the encounter and entered the office.

"Hello sir," Harry said quietly.

"Have a seat." The old wizard looked a hundred years younger than when Harry had last seen him. "Would you like a lemon drop?" Harry half laughed, half cried as he accepted the candy. "What seems to be troubling you, Mr. Potter?"

"I don't think I'm the same Harry Potter." Harry began in a rush, "I mean I'm not who you think I am, or really who anyone thinks I am. I woke up and found myself back in fourth year as a Hufflepuff, and I have no idea how any of this-," Harry stopped when Albus held up a hand.

"Slow down my boy," Harry blushed as those blue eyes examined him behind half-moon spectacles. He felt a light touch in his mind and reflexively pushed the headmaster out of his head. Blue eyes widened in surprise.

"S-sorry sir, next time warn me when you want to see my thoughts so I can prepare myself,"

"You know occlumency." The Headmaster frowned.

"Yes sir,"

"Who taught you?"

"Professor Snape, sir." Harry said, "Though, it wouldn't be the professor you know. He did it because you, or well a different you, asked him to, so I could keep Voldemort out of my head." Dumbledore's eyebrows drew together.

"Voldemort was in your head?" the old wizard asked.

"Well, in my fifth year, he started sending me false visions though my scar... I failed to learn it, because... because I was selfish and because... well, I lost my godfather and..."

"I see. So, you are another Harry Potter from a different world?"

"I think so. I should be almost eighteen, but... well, I finally defeated Voldemort and then I woke up here in this world."

"Ah, so you were the boy-who-lived?"

"Yes, sir." Harry nodded.

"You do not have a scar." Dumbledore pointed out. Harry raised a hand to his forehead and found smooth skin. Relief flooded him, and he let a small smile work its way onto his face.

"It's gone, then. That wretched thing has caused me more pain than it was worth." Harry sucked on his lemon drop thoughtfully, "If I'm not the boy-who-lived in this time, then who is?"

"That would be Mr. Longbottom." There was a puff of smoke and a beautiful red bird appeared on the man's desk. He held an envelope in his beak and turned a black eye on Harry.

"Neville is the boy who lived?" Harry raised an eyebrow, "Seriously?"

"That is correct." Harry let out a terrific sigh and the phoenix warbled a few notes. Dumbledore ran a gnarled hand over the bird's soft plumage and watched Harry carefully.

"I see. Then... I think I should try to find a way to get back to my world. What do you suggest I do until then? I know next to nothing about time travel or dimension jumping."

"I think it would be in the best interest of the school, if we kept the fact that you are from another world a secret. Because you were the boy-who-lived in the other world, you could be in danger from the Dark Lord or any of his followers. I also do not want you to interfere with this world. All I want you to do is to act as a student and complete assignments until you've found a way to get back to your own world. Is that an acceptable agreement?"

"I'll do my best sir." Harry rose from his chair, "It really is great to see you again." Dumbledore's frown deepened.

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Dinner started out strange. Harry began heading for the Gryfindor table, but then remembered almost too late that he was now a Hufflepuff. No one seemed surprised that he had almost made a mistake however, and Harry was beginning to think that the Harry from this world was a complete idiot.

"Oh, nice one Potty," Harry was roughly shoved forward, nearly colliding into another Hufflepuff, "Forget your place?"

"Sod off Malfoy, or I'll put you in yours." Harry growled angrily, turning to face the blond aristocrat. Draco may have helped him defeat Voldemort in his world, but as they were now fourteen again, Harry was finding it hard to get past his old resentments. For a moment, Draco looked startled, but then a slow smile spread across his face.

"How long did you have to practice that one, Pot head?"

"You have about seven seconds to leave me alone, or I will hex your skin orange and turn your hair purple. I'd take a detention just to watch you squirm for a week trying to find a way to undo it. Just try me."

"You can't even cast a proper levitating charm Potter." Draco drawled, but Harry could see the slight confusion in his stormy grey eyes. "What could you possibly do to me?"

"Would you like a demonstration?" Harry had yet to visit the Hufflepuff dormitories, and so was without a wand. There was no need for it, however.

"Maybe another time," Draco looked at him thoughtfully and leaned in very close so that it was almost uncomfortable, "I like your eyes Potter."

"Get out of my face." Harry growled, a light flush coloring his cheeks. He didn't like that arrogant smirk or those confident grey eyes. The way he said those words... had been almost flirtatious, and also mocking. Harry wanted to punch him.

"Want to duel?" the blond grinned, stepping back.

"I wouldn't waste my time on a ponce like you." Harry returned.

"You don't know what you're saying, half-blood," Draco hissed.

"If we dueled, you would be lucky if you managed to finish an incantation before I took your wand." Harry waved a hand in a shooing manner and Draco's cheeks turned pink with anger.

"I think you talk big," He said, "but we all know who's better, don't we."

"I hate to be the barer of bad news, but your tiny world is about to be turned on its end. I hope you enjoy your last few years of freedom."

"What are you insinuating?" Grey eyes narrowed.

"You are so proud..." Harry said thoughtfully, almost to him self, "I was always curious why you allowed yourself to be mastered by him." For a moment, Harry wasn't certain if he meant Draco's Father or Voldemort, but then he realized it didn't matter. It could be either of them, and Draco would take it to mean which ever terrified him the most.

"This is ridiculous," Draco's voice became strained, "My father-,"

"Don't hide behind your father's reputation, Malfoy. It's juvenile. I'd much rather hear what you have to say."

"How dare you."

"Go away, Malfoy, come back when your father isn't speaking for you." Harry grinned as Draco, mouth agape and eyes narrowed in offence, turned on his heel and stalked away, muttering threats as he went. It was so much fun torturing Draco.

"Did you just..." A small voice stammered in disbelief. Harry turned to discover Wayne and another Hufflepuff boy staring at him in awe. Harry raised an eyebrow.

After dinner, Harry followed Wayne to the Hufflepuff dormitory to grab his book bag and discovered the password – 'dryer lint' – and

thought better than to ask. He found his wand placed in the drawer of the small bedside table and again cursed the other Harry for being so obvious and idiotic to leave his wand in such a stupid location. Then again, the other Harry was probably less likely to have his wand jinxed, or his dorm ransacked by any Death Eaters in training. After all, in this world, he wasn't the boy-who-lived. Soon they were headed for the Library to study. Oh, the joys of being fourteen again...

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While Harry was staying in this world, he would have to act like a normal fourteen year old, and also complete assigned schoolwork. It was frustrating having to repeat the school year, but perhaps this time, Harry would surprise everyone by getting good grades for once. Without having to worry about Voldemort, he might actually be able to concentrate on his studies and there was also the fact that he had already been through fourth year and knew what to expect.

"I can't believe we have potions tomorrow. Double potions for that matter." Wayne pinched the bridge of his nose as if in pain.

"I need to look at my schedule." Harry said suddenly, "Where did I put it?"

"Isn't it written on the inside flap of your bag?" Wayne looked at Harry as if he had sprouted two heads.

"Is it?" Harry lifted the flap.

"Yeah, you had professor Sprout-,"

"Got it." Harry interrupted, studying the schedule closely. When the pair reached the Library, they sat down with other fourth year Hufflepuffs. There were seven people, including Harry and Wayne.

"Justin, I don't understand this part." Harry pulled out a scroll of parchment and a quill and ink, discretely watching as Susan Bones flirted openly with Justin Finch-Fletchley.

"Well that's easy. A dishwasher washes dishes." Justin sighed, "You wizards don't know a wit of common sense at times."

"You're a wizard too." Harry pointed out with a grin.

"Don't even get me started on you, Potter." Justin rolled his eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry glanced over his homework load and decided to start on Charms first.

"You were the one who claimed that a stove was in fact a TV."

"Hmph. Well, I've studied a lot since then. I bet you couldn't stump me now." Harry let the feather quill tickle his chin as he grinned cheekily at Justin. He was a better flirt than Susan, that's for sure.

"Ok, what's a cell phone?"

"Mobile telephone, for communication across long distances." Harry pulled his wand out of his bag and tapped it against the book so that it opened to the page he wanted. He had figured that it would not be the best idea to demonstrate his talent for wandless magic just yet. However the wand he used was not actually his, rather it was the other Harry's, and it felt like the wood was straining every time he tried to cast a simple spell, as though it was too difficult to harness his magic. He hoped it wouldn't break.

"Lucky guess. How about a thermometer?"

"Those measure temperature. Take that."

"What ever happened with the blast ended skrewt must have knocked some sense into you. I know you haven't studied muggle weather tools yet."

"Were you guys paying attention at dinner? Harry told off Malfoy." Wayne had his Herbology book out but he had yet to open it. Instead he was leaning over the table, a bright grin plastered across his face. Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

'So it's Harry now?' he thought ruefully, 'Put a Malfoy in his place and suddenly we're chums?'

"I saw it." Hannah Abbott smiled dreamily as if remembering. She still wore her hair in pigtails, Harry noticed. It had never seemed important before, but maybe there was some significance to the hair

style. After all, she had worn her hair in pigtails since the very first day he saw her.

"I got there late. Smith was talking to me about Quidditch try outs. I think I might try for chaser."

"Do you think I could try out?" Harry wondered aloud.

"You?" A girl Harry didn't remember seeing around before looked at him as though to laugh.

"You seem surprised." Harry gave her a withering look, silently cursing his other self for being an uncoordinated idiot.

"Well, yeah. The only kid to lose control of his broom, fall, and oh yes, break his wrist in our first flying lesson, maybe that is reason enough to wonder what potions ingredients you've been swallowing."

"You know... that was first year. I bet I'd be a good seeker."

"Sorry mate, Cedric is our seeker." Ernie Macmillan pointed out.

"He really is good." Harry frowned, "Though he's a bit heavy for a seeker. He'd probably do better as a chaser."

"When did you start taking an interest in sports?" Justin asked. Harry just shrugged.

"We came here to get some homework done didn't we?"

Chapter 3: In Badger's Clothing

Harry woke the next morning wondering why he was surrounded by an annoyingly cheerful yellow bed spread and yellow walls and yellow curtains and deeply contrasting black borders lacing around in delicate patterns across every surface. It took a moment for him to regain his orientation and he began to think that the Hufflepuff dorms were far gaudier than the Gryfindor red and gold.

He cast a wandless tempus charm and found that it was seven o' clock. Breakfast had only just begun and Harry had about an hour before History of Magic with the Gryfindors. He had gotten quite a bit of homework done yesterday despite the fact that most of the study session was spent listening to school news, a.k.a. gossip, but the Hufflepuffs refused to label it as such. At any rate, the only piece of school work left to complete was his essay on the unforgivable curses for Defense and he could finish that before lunch. It was incredibly easy to complete assignments you already knew the answers to.

A few of the other boys were stirring in there beds, stretching or rubbing their eyes. Harry grabbed an extra set of clothes from his trunk and made for the showers. Unlike the showers in Gryfindor tower, these showers had stalls with yellow curtains for privacy, and even a changing area. Harry was mildly impressed, and a little miffed that the Gryfindors did not have the same opportunity for privacy. Harry had had to get over any sort of shyness and modesty very quickly. It had never been fun to wash in front of all the other boys who were all taller and broader than he ever was. The Dursley family had starved him to the point where it had stunted his growth, not to mention growing up in a dark cupboard for the first eleven years of his life didn't help much.

Justin waved at him as he exited a shower stall. Harry, with his arms full, only smiled and said a quiet good morning before entering another. As he began to strip down he noticed that the stalls even had a full length mirror and a small wooden bench to set clothing on.

Harry glanced at his reflection as he was about to remove his boxers and stopped to fully take in his appearance. It was strange how different he looked, how much younger his body appeared. His fourteen-year-old reflection stared back with tired eyes and pale, unblemished skin. All of the scars were gone, and he no longer

needed a glamour charm to hide them. His brilliant green eyes looked even brighter behind the thinner glasses contrasting vividly against the forever messy dark hair, but it seemed darker now, a true black. He was a little bit taller than he remembered being at fourteen as well, but he was still slim, and regrettably shorter than any of his year mates.

Sighing at his vanity, Harry removed the last of his clothing and stepped into the shower. It was strange reorienting himself with this new body's smooth skin and delicate hands.

'Have I never worked a day in my life?' Harry sneered in disgust as he thought of his other self and what sort of person he must have been.

After stepping out of the shower and casting a drying spell, Harry dressed himself and quickly made his way back to the dorms to grab his books and head to breakfast. On his way to the Great Hall, he nearly collided with another person. It was not until he caught a glimpse of the radish earrings and long blond hair that he recognized her.

"Oh. Hello." Luna Lovegood greeted him dreamily.

"Hi, Luna." Harry grinned, "I'm sorry for almost running into you."

"Did the Wackspurts leave? You seem better than the other day." Her brows knit in confusion, but she still smiled.

"Mm? Oh, that must be it. But I don't think I'll ever know for sure if I will ever completely get rid of them." Harry said gravely, "Where are you off to? Classes don't start for another half hour."

"Oh, there is a broken feather quill in the second classroom on the second floor. I need it for my necklace. Maybe I should give one to you, to keep the Wackspurts from getting to you."

"I would be honored, Luna." Harry smiled. He had never really quite understood how she managed to make her warding amulets out of everyday items. Some were quite powerful and could be made to deflect certain curses or creatures. He suspected that Luna was able to sense different energies in objects and could combine them

in such a way so that they might be useful to one who holds or wears it.

"Here, you can have this one." Luna pulled a long chain of crinkled paper, glass from a broken inkwell, and five small green feathers, presumably from a parrot or perhaps a fwooper, spaced unevenly between bits of wood. Between each piece was a knotted thread tied loosely so they made a loop.

"Thank you, Luna." Harry said, surprised, and slipped it gently over his head, having to loop it twice so it would not hang down to his waist and obstruct his movement, "What does it do?"

"It should keep the Wackspurts away, at least for a little while. And it might even protect you from crupples if you tie that red string next to the third feather a bit tighter." Harry immediately tightened the red string and thanked Luna.

This time Harry remembered to sit at the Hufflepuff table, taking a spot in between Wayne and Justin. He listened with mild interest as Hannah was explaining the different types of levitation spells to the other fourth years, such as wingardium leviosa, and mobilcorpus. Apparently there was a quiz in Charms today on levitation spells and their different purposes and why... etc.

"Well, mobilcorpus is used to transport bodies, but even though it is a difficult spell to master, it takes less physical magic to sustain. I think that it must be because it is a more specific command." She took a sip of her juice.

"Why wouldn't you use wingardium leviosa, I mean rather, why do you think it is harder to move a body with that particular spell?" Harry let his chin rest comfortably in his palm and he smiled sweetly. Hannah looked at him with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, if you're so smart, why don't you tell us?"

"It's more fun if you guess." Harry tapped his finger against the ridge of his cup, "I'll give you a hint. Why do you think we started with feathers in first year?"

"Well, because they're light... oh!"

"Weight makes a difference in wingardium leviosa. To move a body with mobilcorpus one is using the magic already present in the body being levitated, this is why it is extremely important not to use that particular spell to move a muggle over long distances, otherwise you will find it even more draining than wingardium leviosa, and it is even more important to avoid moving a witch or wizard who's magic is nearly depleted. Otherwise you could potentially harm the one you levitate, theoretically, if you deplete the magical core of a person, you can make them into a squib, although, I've never heard of that happening. It would be better to find another means of transport, and there are a few other-,"

"Harry," Justin slapped a hand over Harry's mouth, interrupting his speech, "First of all, no one wants a lecture this early in the day right before History of Magic, secondly, when were you planning on telling us you were a closet Ravenclaw?"

"Huh?" Harry asked, but it was a bit muffled.

"I wonder if blast ended skrewts make you smarter if you get hit by one?" Wayne piled a second helping of pancakes on his plate and began smothering them in a lake of syrup.

"Well, I was just... um, reading about it the other day, in the library." Harry had no idea if there was any of this information in the library or not, but the excuse would suffice.

"Do we have anything due for potions after History of Magic?" Wayne asked.

"No, but I would expect an in class essay on the reading he assigned last Thursday." Justin pulled out a thin book, which Harry assumed was a planner of some sort, and flipped through the pages, "So before that, we should at least review the burn-healing paste and probably look ahead at the hair growth solution." Harry grinned when he heard that. It had been a while since his own fourth year potions class, but Harry could brew nearly every medical potion ever made and the hair growth solution sounded like it would be a simple task at the very least.

"You don't look worried at all," Hannah observed, "Usually you go pale at the mention of Snape or his classes."

"I'm prepared this time."

"I doubt he'll let you near an actual potion after what happened the last time." Justin shivered. "It took the whole day to get rid of those awful sores. Snape was furious."

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"Well, maybe if you would pay attention during the lecture, you wouldn't need me to copy notes. I swear, neither of you will pass your O.W.L.s if you keep falling asleep in class."

"Hermione, everyone falls asleep in professor Bins class, except you."

Harry could hardly keep his eyes off of the younger Hermione and Ron beginning their customary argument before class. It was almost like he could walk up to the two of them, swing his arms over their shoulders and laugh, but of course he restrained himself. Instead he smiled fondly at the two Gryffindors looking away only when Neville caught him staring.

Neville was the boy-who-lived in this world, more self assured and graceful than he remembered, but underneath he was terrified of his destiny. Harry flashed Neville a grin that said a great many things, and glimpsed confusion in return. It wasn't as if Neville truly understood his connection to Voldemort yet, but deep down, he probably knew the gist of it. They both did, and Harry suddenly wanted to speak with him and tell him that he was not alone as he felt, but class was starting, and he suspected that Neville was already coming to conclusions of his own about what that smile had meant, and none of them were likely to be good judging by the light coloring in the boy's cheeks.

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Harry sat in the library flicking through book after book, not finding anything remotely related to time travel. The fact was, Harry was a poor researcher. It was at times like this when he painfully missed Hermione's natural way with books, knowing exactly where to look. Harry learned better when he was fighting for his life or when his body was under a heavy amount of stress. Hermione however was

on a constant quest for new information. It was a shame that he no longer had exclusive access to her researching skills.

The only thing Harry had found so far was a small paragraph on timeturners in an atlas on wizarding inventions in the past three centuries. He thought if he began with something he knew, like a timeturner, it might lead to other references to time travel, or dimensional travel.

Frustrated, he flicked his wrist irritably and sent the book sliding across the small table with the force his magic used to shut it. He sighed and let his head rest against the table, digging his fingers into his hair.

"I hate this." He muttered into the wood. It had only been fifteen minutes, and already all he could think about was what he wanted for lunch. It was as if the moment he opened a book his mind wandered off somewhere else. Harry learned best through trial and error, not by books.

"Are you having trouble finding something, Potter?" Harry sat up straight, and turned to find Hermione standing a respectful distance from where he sat. She looked, if Harry read her expression right, like she had found something intriguing, and he momentarily berated himself for using wandless magic where he could be easily observed. She had most likely witnessed his careless act.

"Erm..." Harry was torn between hugging her and running away, and unfortunately both were out of the question for the moment. "Well, I... you see..."

"What interest do you have in wizard inventions?"

"Well, well, what do we have here?" Harry planted his face into his palm, and ground his teeth together in irritation, "If it isn't a mudblood and our resident idiot flirting with each other. Planning to dirty your blood further Potter?" Draco slinked around a bookshelf and Hermione gripped the book she held tightly and glared hard at the blond pureblood.

"Don't you have anything better to do than insult my family?" Hermione spat.

"Probably," Draco peered carelessly at his nails, "yet, here I am."

"Would you like to know a secret, Malfoy?" Harry stood from his seat and stepped between the Slytherin and Gryffindor, leaning in to whisper in the blond boy's ear, "Your hair is neon green." Harry twirled his index finger in a small motion and then backed up looking into steely gray eyes. "I can change it back if you apologize to Her-Miss Granger." He grinned watching Draco's expression slowly reveal confusion and worry. Harry stifled his laughter behind a hand.

"What did you do to my hair?" Draco tugged on his fringe worriedly, "You didn't really turn it green did you?" Hermione laughed outright, pulling a mirror from her book bag and handing it to Draco. Gray eyes widened and then narrowed to angry slits.

"You will pay for this Potter."

"Well, if you had watched your language, you wouldn't be in this situation." He grimaced at the aristocrat's vanity, but then reminded himself that said aristocrat was like most young teenagers and was incredibly self absorbed. Best to compromise then. "If you swear never to call her such a vile term again, I'll change you back before anyone else sees. I promise. We can pretend this never even happened."

"F- you, Potter. You're just as dirty as she is, aren't you? Why should I listen to a freak born of a mudblood mother? You're pathetic, Potter. She should have taken you with her-," The spine of a book collided into the book shelf behind Draco, a mere centimeter from his ear.

"Do not insult my mother, Malfoy," Harry hissed, green eyes burning with surfacing anger, "There are many truths you do not know about the world, your own blood being one of them." Harry had Draco pressed against the bookshelf now, his voice had become quiet and urgent. "Would you like to know what could happen to you if you inherit certain attributes from you own mother, Draco Malfoy Black?" Then his voice lowered into a very quiet whisper so that Hermione would not hear his next words. "You are a quarter veela, Draco, and you are aware of what will happen if you inherit the allure, don't you? What use does Voldemort have for a creature, whose blood is tainted in his eyes?"

"I'm a pureblood."

"There are potions that will prove otherwise, surely."

"I am not a... a creature!" Draco shoved Harry away and quickly pulled his wand.

"Do not even think you will be able to land that curse, Malfoy." Harry snapped his fingers and Draco's hair returned to its former white-blond. Hermione's sudden intake of air reminded Harry that he seriously needed to remember to use his wand. Somehow he would have to placate the girl, though he knew the chances were slim to none in convincing her that he was just really angry and it was all on accident. She was not an idiot who would believe such a lame excuse.

"I'm not... my mother is a pureblood." Draco's hand was loose around his wand, his gray eyes staring disbelievingly at him.

"Well, she is a Black, but she is also half veela. Have your head of house brew you a potion. Then you at least might prepare yourself for what is to come."

"You are lying." Malfoy jerked away, "And I will prove it!" With that he stormed out of the Library, causing Madame Pince to shush him on the way.

Slowly, Harry bent to pick up the book that his magic had thrown in his sudden anger. Hermione's eyes burned into him, but she said nothing as he gently set the book on the table from whence it came. Letting out a sigh he looked up at her with his tired gaze, and he watched her disbelieving frown become a thoughtful one.

"I was interested in researching time travel, but I'm really not all that skilled with the process. All I have found regarding time was a time turner."

"For what purpose? And what was that about veela?"

"I need to be getting to class soon," Harry scowled, "It was nothing important, I was just curious of consequences and the like that can happen with time travel. I guess it doesn't make sense to me how it would be possible. As for Malfoy... it would be best if you did not repeat any of what was said." Hermione nodded, taking the half-

truth at face value. Somehow, being a Hufflepuff was an invaluable asset. Everyone assumes you are so straight forward and honest. Harry had not forgotten his near placement into the house of snakes, and it was in this world more than ever that he had need for such Slytherin tactics. The reason he went to Gryffindor in the end, he supposed, was because he was not all that ambitious. "Maybe I'll see you around then?" Harry gave her a tentative but genuine smile. He really had missed the nattering from his school days before everything went to shit.

"Sure." She graced him with her own tentative smile, "And thanks for standing up for me. Especially to that prat."

"It was my pleasure."

"You used to be so quite and shy." Hermione tugged on a lock of her brown hair, "What changed? Actually, if I remember correctly, you were the one that got petrified by the basilisk in second year. Neville told me about you, that when you woke up," She giggled, "You couldn't stop staring at him."

"Did I?" Harry laughed nervously, "What can I say? I was an idiot." Seriously he thought.

"Then there was that one time you slipped in herbology, oh and you remember flying lessons. That couldn't have been very fun."

"Ha ha, yes, erm... not very. But I've gotten more confident on a broom since then." If Harry could meet his other self, he thought he might strangle him, "You certainly know how to make a person feel good about themselves don't you."

"Oh, I'm sorry." She looked less remorseful than Harry would have liked, but he took it in stride. Hermione stared at him again with a gaze that made him feel utterly and helplessly exposed. "You are a lot different then what I would have expected." She said finally.

"I wonder if I should take that as a compliment."

Chapter: 4 A Hairy Harry

In Harry's opinion, Charms had probably been the most interesting class taught at Hogwarts other than defense, however having already completed the class curriculum, it had become a tedious and boring endeavor for the most part. Half of the class was spent writing an essay on levitation charms, and the last half of the period was spent demonstrating the next set of spells they would be studying.

As it turned out, Thursday's lesson would be spent practicing water based spells, and the effects of magic under water. Harry was eager for this lesson. Spending time with the water element was not something he did often, and he thought it might help to balance his relationship with the four. Fire was another he had been neglecting, but for good reasons. Harry was extremely cautious around fire, even more so than the other three. Fire was fickle, like the wind, yet wrathful like the earth, and nearly as suffocating as water. It was dangerous to summon, and Harry could not think of a time where he would need to summon such an element without the other three to keep it in check.

Pulling himself back to the present, Harry headed down to the dungeons for his potions class with the Ravenclaws. One thing he was looking forward to was seeing Snape. No, the animosity between them had never quite diminished. However, Harry had grown to respect the man for all of his sacrifices, but that did not mean he liked the greasy old bat. Snape had never been able to look at him with anything less than mild hatred because of his resemblance to James. Hopefully in this world Snape would just ignore him instead of provoking him with his barbed insults. The man could hold a grudge for a long time. That was certain.

Upon entering the dank classroom, Harry breathed out a sigh of disgust. He had never liked potions. The fumes that billowed out from the cauldrons often left him feeling oily and disgusting. He had learned a great deal about most medical potions and even some poisons. The two years spent out of school before the last battle had been hard, but he had learned quite a lot. When he wasn't asleep or taking care of other necessary functions of living, Harry devoted his time to studying. Hermione had helped him learn everything, had helped him remember the spells and the potions... without her, Harry would never have found out about the wild magic.

A few Ravenclaws had already seated themselves on one side of the room, so he figured that he was to sit on the opposing side.

"Potter," Harry whirled around, "Take your seat before you destroy my classroom a third time." Snape, in his dark and brooding glory swooped out an arm like a great wing, pointing with a long pale finger at a desk at the very front of the classroom. Harry sighed and made his way over to the designated seat. "You are to brew last week's potion under close supervision. If you do not manage to brew the burn-healing paste correctly, I will fail you. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir." Harry sighed, letting his eyes drop to his books sitting on the desk, partly to look complacent and partly to avoid Snape's legilimens.

"It will be most pleasant without your hazardous mishaps, I should think." Harry could hear the sneer forming on the professor's sallow face. Inside he was cheering, lucky to have been assigned such a simple medical potion. He was not confident enough to brew the potion without the instructions, but that did not worry him in the slightest. What fourth year would be expected to brew from memory?

The rest of the students flowed into the room to take their seats, and when the last person was seated, Snape descended upon them with little mercy. Harry watched him closely as he quizzed students on the hair growing potion, which Harry assumed he would be making up somehow outside of regular class.

Grabbing the thick tome from his bag, Harry flipped through the pages, quickly finding the ingredient list and instructions. On his way to the store room, he noticed Snape's glare attempting to burn a hole in the back of his head. With years of practice, Harry simply ignored it. Right now he wanted to focus on his task, potion brewing, and not the legendary dungeon bat prowling the rows of his classroom.

The ingredients for the burn-healing paste were actually surprisingly common and in a way expected. Working with aloe plants could be somewhat challenging, and in this particular potion their preparation was of serious importance. Taking his steel blade, Harry peeled back the skin of the fleshy plant, mashing the insides with the heel of

his palm. The skin would need to be shredded and mixed in with the tadpole tails in the fourth step. The mush from the aloe would be used to coat the sides of the cauldron, which Harry applied liberally. Next he filled the container a third full of water and proceeded to grind two scales from a Chinese fireball.

When Snape stalked by to watch his progress, Harry did not pause as he added in the tadpole tails. He could nearly taste the surprise and wonder seeming to ooze from the man, but to one who had not known Snape it appeared a grudging sneer.

"Stay after class, Potter." Snape scowled.

"Yes sir." Harry stirred the liquid counter clockwise while pouring in about a half cup of powdered basalt and pine dust.

By the end of the lesson, Harry's paste had set to a mint green color and in an hour it would be ready to be applied. There was a quicker way to make a potion to treat burns, although it was far more painful to the victim, and it was ingested, not absorbed through the skin. But that was only supposed to be used if the burns were so severe the person could die of dehydration or if it would be impractical to try and coat the entire body with paste.

"Bottle up your dreadful attempts and set them on my desk. Make sure to label them correctly so I know where to place the zero in your records." Snape stalked from the back of the room towards the front, and it was a poor Hufflepuff that stepped out in front of him only to trip and let slip the potion he carried. Harry would have felt bad if he had not been pelted with the projectile liquid. Luckily the vials were never very large. Unfortunately, the potion was highly concentrated and three drops was enough to grow hair three feet in length. The potion mostly came into contact with his robe sleeve, giving Harry precious seconds to banish the mess before it soaked through. Some however, landed on his hand and hair, and it had taken only four seconds for Harry to find himself buried in long tresses of the darkest black.

Harry let out a tremendous sigh and sat back on his stool. The hair was heavy after all and by the looks of it, would be carpeting the classroom in another minute or so. The rest of the class made a hasty exit while an enraged Snape began to dock a multitude of

points. When the last student had gone, Snape took a deep breath and rounded on Harry.

The black eyes glared at him with fury, but Harry was unimpressed.

"For once, Mr. Potter, this chaos was not conjured by your usual incompetence. You must be disappointed." Sarcasm dripped from his voice like venom, biting and hurtful.

"I might feel better were I not suffocating beneath cousin It."

"Cousin who?"

"Never mind professor. Would you mind cutting some off so I might breath, sir? At least enough so I can move my arms." Snape took aim with his wand and cut the hair by his feet, then took a hand full, cutting it so it hung to his shoulder blades.

"Wait there a moment. We will need to remove the hair from your hands," Harry looked down at the back of his hand and tried to lift it. Unfortunately he was standing on the ends of the hair and winced.

"This is ridiculous," Harry growled, slicing the hair off with a severing hex. Black locks fell to the floor.

"Give me your hand." Snape had returned from his store cabinet, his scowl set to level two, meaning he was more exasperated than annoyed. "This will burn," He warned.

"I'm sure it will," Harry eyed the white paste dubiously "Just get it over with." Snape covered his hand with a spell before dipping his fingers into the sulfuric smelling paste. When it made contact, Harry watched in fascination as the paste began to bubble and eat through the hairs. When it had seeped down to the root, he winced as his nerve ending were being slowly dissolved.

"Can you hold out for another minute?" Snape asked, trying very hard to look gruff and uncaring. Harry didn't fall for it.

"I'll live." Harry grinned knowingly at the man.

"Then I will try and distract you a bit while the paste works." Snape summoned a chair and took a seat. "You brewed the burn-healing

paste perfectly. This I did not expect. How, when you are likely to be the absolute worst potions student I have ever taught, did you manage to dash all of my hopes at getting rid of you once and for all?"

"That has to be the least inspiring thing anyone has said to me all day." Harry breathed in shortly trying to focus on the conversation, rather than the pain.

"How did you do it?"

"I studied harder than usual?" Harry shrugged.

"I am inclined to think you cheated." Snape reached over and took Harry's hand, tapped it with his wand, and banished the stinging paste. His skin felt raw and had turned red, but there was no trace of hair.

"What about this hair?" Harry tugged lightly on a black lock, "Can you cut it, and not make it look too terribly ridiculous?"

"I am not a barber, Mr. Potter."

"I understand professor. I can find a mirror and do it myself." Harry stood and made to leave.

"I did not dismiss you." Snape said coolly. Harry blew the hair out of his face with a sigh and sat back down. "Tell me, now, how did you brew the burn-healing paste?"

"I just followed the instructions, sir!" Harry snapped.

"Just... followed the instructions? Five points from Hufflepuff, for your rudeness." Snape summoned a piece of aloe and cut it with a fingernail. Harry watched as a clear liquid oozed from the wound. "Now, tell me who helped you."

"Sir," Harry looked away, "I know I've never been any good at potions-,"

"Never any good?" Snape's eye brow rose in disbelief as he applied the clear ooze to Harry's searing skin, "You've nearly destroyed a

Hogwart's classroom, a dungeon no less, trying to brew a calming draught. 'Never any good' is an understatement."

"You wound me sir." Harry bit out, letting his chin rest the palm of the hand not being tended to. It was as if the Harry from this world had been at least three times more pathetic than Neville had been from his time. It stung his pride a bit more than he would have liked.

"Now look at me and tell me the truth." Snape released the hand. It felt better, Harry had to admit, but it was still an irritated red. "Who helped you do it? What spell or potion did you use? I assure you, that I will not tolerate cheating in my class."

"I would rather not look at you, sir." Harry muttered not meeting his professor's gaze. "I'd rather keep my thoughts to myself." Snape was silent for a long moment, quietly thinking of the best course of action.

"How did you cheat in potions class today?" Snape repeated, a touch of frustration creeping in. He did not know what else he could do but interrogate the boy. Using veritiserum was out of the question, as it was illegal if consumed by a minor without a parent or guardian's permission, neither option of which Snape could currently consider.

"I did not." Harry stared down at his hands, clenched around the rim of the metal stool he sat on. They tightened and loosened between his legs, the sleeves nearly hiding them from view.

"You brewed the burn-healing paste on your own?"

"I did."

"Who taught you?" and Harry paused, as if struggling with something.

"Hermione Granger, sir." He said finally, "That is the truth." Green eyes looked up imploringly, shining with such honest emotion that Snape could not believe the boy was lying.

"Why?" Dark eyes fell on brilliant green, and he watched in fascination when those green eyes flinched, quickly disappearing from view behind dark lashes; the hands around the stool tightened

with uncertainty. "Relax, Potter. I will refrain from using legilimency on you." Harry shook his head and opened his mouth to speak, but found no voice.

"If you did not cheat," Snape's gaze leveled with Harry's own, "Then I have no choice but to award Hufflepuff two points." Harry's eyes widened and he thought to himself that Snape looked like he was in... a lot of pain.

"That must have taken a lot, sir." Harry frowned, grudgingly. He was always like that. Such blatant favoritism for his own house and he only ever gave points to another house when he was truly and utterly impressed.

"I will be expecting this level of performance in my classes from now on Mr. Potter. Anything less and I will have you removed from this class. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Now get out."

"Thank you, sir, for believing me."

"I did not say anything about believing, Mr. Potter. If you fail to perform at an equal level of skill, not only will you be removed from this course, I will also know that you have cheated, and your house will lose fifty points if I discover that is the case, and you will be serving detention every evening until the summer holidays."

"That would be... fair. If that is all, sir, I would like to be going." Harry still did not look at him, and Snape could not shake the feeling that something was off about those eyes. The boy had hardly ever spoken in class, and not many students outside Hufflepuff conversed with him. In fact, the only detail he could recall with startling clarity is that he had to be the most uncoordinated person Snape had ever seen. Not only was he a failure at potions, he was rumored to be a misfortune magnet, barely passing his classes, getting bullied by the upper classmen. Beyond that, Snape knew nothing. He shook his head, tiredly coming out of his musings. Potter was a Hufflepuff, and not his responsibility.

"Get out then." Snape waved him away, as if he were a fly or some pest he couldn't be bothered with. Harry slipped out without another word.

Quickly, Harry found himself a bathroom with a mirror. He couldn't very well trapeze about with long, wavy dark locks of hair that made him look far too girly for his liking. He looked too much like his mother than he was comfortable with, and privately thought that if he changed his hair color to red and had it straightened, he might be able to pass as a much younger, skinnier, Lily Evans. No, that would not do at all. He needed to reclaim what little masculinity he had left.

With that, Harry began to use his fingers to send small bits of magic to the tips, carefully slicing and pulling the long hairs away to fall softly onto the floor. He worked very hard to get everything even, though the style turned out to be somewhat feathery. At least he looked more boyish, and thankfully less like his mother. Because his face was no longer marred with that cursed scar, and because it was obvious the other Harry never played sports or did anything remotely physically demanding, he had a bit of baby fat, a thin build, and very soft skin.

Harry shuddered, wishing he could find something to bring back some muscle, or even some calluses. This body was weak. It was unused to discomfort. Such a waste! Starting a fight with someone just to get a few bloody bruises and an adrenaline rush was beginning to sound like a good idea. Maybe climbing the outer wall of the castle, anything to get rid of this pitiable shell of a body.

Question: is anyone interested in a short story about what happens to the other Harry? Oo

R&R and I'll be the happiest author in the world! Or not, and enjoy my story anyway. :D

Disclaimer: I own nothing. HP belongs to JKR

Gasp! I just got my first real flame! ouch.

Anyway, I'd like to let you know that this story isn't slash. There will be a lot of fascination with Harry from the other characters because of what he is. Meaning they will be infatuated with his magic. In this fic, Harry has not really had time to explore his romantic life, nor will he this year as he will be busy with other things. I do not discriminate sexuality, neither will Harry.

I also originally posted this fic under Harry and Draco because the story is centered on them. I would have also put it under Harry and Neville, although they do not interact as much in this story. Truthfully, the only REAL paring in this story will be Harry and his magic.... But you'll have to wait and see what I mean by that.

Now, on with the story...

Chapter 5: And along came a spider

"Cedric, I know we need better chasers, but there aren't enough Hufflepuffs that have the talent needed to play. We also need a good seeker, because you'll be gone next year. How am I supposed to recruit some decent flyers? If we want to win at least one of the games, we're going to need a miracle. I need some advice here!" Harry watched as another Hufflepuff team member, a beater he thought, all but groveled at Cedric's feet, begging him for help.

"I'll do what I can," Cedric sighed, "but it's ultimately up to the other students."

This was it, Harry thought, watching the pair discuss over their dinner. He should take this opportunity to make a good impression – that is if he could stop the pounding of his heart. Hopefully they wouldn't laugh at him, especially now that he thought he might not be able to keep himself from running up to the boy, grabbing him, and sobbing into his shoulder, thanking Merlin, or God, or whoever that he was not the charred corpse he had dragged back to Hogwarts after Voldemort returned for the last time.

"Digory?" Harry stood a respectful distance away, but he couldn't stop his fingers from twitching slightly when the tall boy turned on

the bench to face him. He had never been able to forgive himself for Cedric's death, and here he was, alive and talking about Quidditch as though nothing could be more important.

"Yes... er... Potter, was it?" Cedric had a warm smile, and soft eyes.

"I'd like to try for seeker next year." Harry said firmly.

"You?" The other boy raised a skeptical eyebrow. The light haired boy looked as though he might laugh, but he held it in so not to be rude.

"Yes, me." Harry frowned. "I can try out at least, can't I? I promise you won't be disappointed."

"Did I just hear right?" A low voice came from behind, and Harry did not need to turn around to know who it was. He could recognize that irritating drawl anywhere. "You, you're going to attempt to tryout for the house team?" Harry closed his eyes and mentally counted to ten, but the moron just kept talking. "The only idiot to break his wrist after landing on his arse in first year is trying out? Hell must have frozen over. Do you even own a broom Potter? Can you even afford one? This is rich. Are you going to ask your mum and dad if they will buy you one? Oh wait, I forgot, you haven't got-," Harry's right fist connected with Draco's jaw with a loud crack, and he felt a satisfying pain tingle through his hand as the blond fell to the floor. Sometimes, physical violence was the best alternative for venting frustrations. Counting certainly was not working.

"Twenty points from Hufflepuff!" McGonagall appeared out of no where, but Harry did not flinch, keeping his eyes on the fallen antagonist. "I am appalled by your behavior, Mr. Potter. Striking a student is against the rules. You will serve detention with me this evening at eight o'clock sharp. Is that clear?" Draco managed to stand, his palm against his cheek, eyes wet with unshed tears.

"Mind your own business." Harry all but growled at the blond, preferring not to acknowledge the deputy headmistress. He inhaled sharply and stalked out of the Great Hall. Any longer and he could not be held responsible for what he might do to a certain fourth year Slytherin.

Once outside, all of the pressure and strain on Harry's control seemed to evaporate into the crisp air. Being fourteen was harder than he remembered. With all the extra hormones starting to kick in and all of his emotions rushing about, it was amazing that he had yet to seriously injure a student or staff member.

It was chilly, but not quite cold yet, and the sun had only recently disappeared behind the horizon. Peace settled around the courtyard, and Harry closed his eyes, sighing.

Cedric would live, he would make sure. If it were not for his need to be so bloody noble, there would have been no death that night, and he would have been spared the unnecessary grief. Somehow, he needed to find a way to minimize the damage, though it would still be necessary for Voldemort's body to be resurrected using Neville's blood. Unfortunately, that particular event had need of occurring.

The best way to do this would be to take Cedric's place and become a Hogwarts Champion. He was "underage," and that would be strange having two students, two fourteen-year-olds, competing in such a dangerous tournament. Harry would also need to find a way around the age limit. Convincing the magic to let him pass would prove to be a challenge, but not impossible.

It was six o'clock or something close to it, meaning he had two hours to work on homework if he wanted, otherwise, he thought he might go flying. Using a school broom would be a huge step down from his old Firebolt, but there was no reason he could not manage. Harry dearly wished he had the money to purchase a new broom, but he was uncertain about his inheritance and living situation. In fact, he knew nothing at all about where he would end up going after the school year ended.

The Quidditch pitch was calling, or to be more accurate the sky, wide open and inviting, with a cool wind on the rise. Six goal posts stood towering over the grassy field, the hoops losing their gleam as night fell slowly over the grounds. To Harry they looked like gigantic bubble wands, only big and metal, and Dudley wasn't trying to hit him over the head with it. The stands were empty of students, and quite save for the creaking of the old wood

Casting a wandless unlocking charm on the broom shed, Harry selected an old and battered Cleansweep five turning the handle this

way and that to look for scratches or splintering. The wood hummed beneath his fingers, its magic curling around his skin in familiarity. If magic could flirt, Harry was sure that this would be what it felt like. It tickled him as he swung his leg over and took off into the dim light.

Soaring upwards, Harry was surprised at the smoothness of the flight and though it didn't compare with his Firebolt, it was still impressive for the model and obvious abuse it has seen over the years. Wind whipped through his hair, and his eyes stung. This was freedom. This was bliss.

Harry pulled off a number of twists, turns and death defying dives before his time was cut short by a detention with his old head of house.

Returning to the castle with his hair sticking up at odd angles, he basked in the warmth, letting his fingers thaw from the cold air. His stomach grumbled, making its appetite known to the portraits hanging on the walls. The flight had been thrilling, and Harry felt that, had he the time, he might have spun in circles through the corridor and not feel ashamed by his childishness. As he made his way up to McGonagall's office, his flushed skin began to fade and his bright eyes dimmed in preparation for the detention. This un-freedom, coming down from a high, down to the very depth of this low reality; he took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Harry knocked softly, and opened the door when a stern "come in," was heard behind the thick wood. The professor sat regally behind her desk, marking papers with her feather quill, and did not look up while Harry stood awkwardly waiting for her to offer him a seat or at least explain what he would be doing during detention. Three minutes he stood, not making a sound, patiently waiting for her to acknowledge him.

Finally, she set her quill to the side and looked up, straightening her spectacles.

"Mr. Potter." Her voice was hard and for the first time, Harry realized that the McGonagall from his world had truly cared for him, because all of the softness and leniency had disappeared turning into this cold tone devoid of the love and pity she had once given.

"Ma'am," Harry said quietly. It was fine, though, he thought. He never wanted the pity, and he certainly didn't need her concern. This relationship between them now was better.

"Would you care to explain why you hit Mr. Malfoy?"

"Would you care to hear an explanation?" Harry returned, "If it is fine with you, I'd just soon as get this detention over with." She gave him a look that told him he was near that line that shouldn't be crossed.

"I would like an explanation, so I can try to get a fair picture of what happened."

"He... he was just talking about my mum and dad." Harry looked at a side wall, not wanting to see the reaction, whether it was pity or indifference. Both were unappreciated.

"So that made it all right to hit him?" her voice held that reprimanding tone.

"In my inexperienced teenage mind, yes." Harry bit out, "I have homework for tomorrow, so I wouldn't mind getting started as soon as possible." There was a silence and then she exhaled as if exasperated.

"Five points from Hufflepuff for your rudeness. You will be shining the trophies in the trophy case at the end of the hall. No magic. Your wand," She held out her hand expectantly and Harry sneered at the Gryffindor head of house as he handed over the wand and quietly dismissed himself to work on the trophy cases.

He would of course use magic.

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Harry woke with a start, his breathing labored. He had been having a nightmare, but he couldn't remember it now that he was awake. The feeling of terror disappeared and became something akin to disgust. He was covered in sweat so that his sheets stuck to his legs and his shirt to his back. Throwing the covers up and off of him, he quietly grabbed a set of clothes and went to take a shower.

It was still early, and the sky was only just beginning to lighten, shadows forming solid lines across the grounds. Harry wondered if he could catch the headmaster awake at this hour. There were some questions he needed answered. Like what his living situation was, and if he had any money to his name. Or where he would be staying over the summer, if he was still indeed related to the Dursley family, not that he would be returning to that hell hole.

After his shower, Harry pulled on his, for once, decently fitting clothes, and wandlessly cast a drying charm on his hair. Loading his book bag with his texts for transfiguration and a few others he swung the strap over his shoulder and went off in search of the Headmaster, starting with his office.

It just so happened, that Dumbledore was heading for his office at the same time as Harry, and the old man smiled, greeting him like an old friend, though Harry could see past the friendly façade. There was fear there, something Harry was unused to seeing in the Headmaster's bright blue eyes.

"Mr. Potter, you are up and about at an early hour." The man observed.

"I need to speak with you. I have a few questions that are rather important, if you have some time, sir."

"Yes, yes of course, let's head up to my office, shall we." Harry followed the old man up the winding stairs that lay beyond the gargoyle. When they entered into the office, Dumbledore offered Harry a chair then sat down himself. "Now what is on your mind, my boy?"

"I'd like to know about my living situation. Where do I go over the summer? Who do I stay with? Do I have any... living relatives?"

"Ah..." Dumbledore shifted uncomfortably, "You're parents were murdered by Death Eaters, and your grandmother, who was taking care of you the night your parents were attacked, passed away when you were four. You do have three living relatives, although-,"

"The Dursleys?" Harry asked, grimacing. He wouldn't go back there.

"They did not take you in. Instead they thought it would be better for you to grow up in a magical orphanage, where people on staff would be able to control any magical outbursts or anything out of the ordinary that they couldn't handle."

"I see." Harry nodded. An orphanage didn't sound awful. If Voldemort lived through it, he could too, and this time it wasn't a muggle one. "I guess no one wanted me in this world either." Harry sighed in a depressing manner.

"You are not unwanted, Mr. Potter." Dumbledore looked over his half-moon spectacles, those blue eyes, still suspicious, cut through to him. Reassurance washed over him like cold water, and he was startled by the effect those words had on him.

"How do you do that?"

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you are speaking of." The old hands clasped together, and he leaned over his desk curiously.

"You always seem to say the right things," Harry's eyes softened but remained bright with unshed tears. His heart beat slow and strong and he could hardly breathe for the emotion pulling all of the air from the room. "Thank you." He whispered, then cleared his throat. There were still a few more questions. "Do I have access to my family vault?"

"I am afraid not. Until you are of age, your family vault is unavailable. You do however receive an allowance from Gringotts, I believe, out of the vault, and will continue to until you are seventeen."

"That's fine." Harry nodded. "I will owl Gringotts about the details later. One more question. I need to know about the last four years here at Hogwarts, and what happened between Neville and Voldemort."

"Ah..." Dumbledore sat back in his chair and looked at a spot on the wall behind Harry, his left hand twirling the end of his long white beard, "In Neville's first year, the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, Quirinus Quirrell, was possessed by Lord Voldemort. Neville defeated him with the help of his friends, and his mother's protection." Harry nodded.

"Was Ron hurt in a chess game?" Harry asked to make sure, "And the stone was hidden in the mirror, right?"

"That is correct."

"And second year?"

"Neville saved Miss Ginny Weasley from a Basilisk and Lord Voldemort's memory."

"In the Chamber of Secrets." Harry nodded again.

"No... it was in the corridor on the second floor..."

"What? But Neville should have been able to find the entrance! How did he save Ginny then?" Green eyes narrowed in concentration. "That can't..."

"I believe Ginny was so overwhelmed by Lord Voldemort's possession, that her body gave out earlier than he had intended. She collapsed outside of the Girl's Bathroom on the second floor. Do you know which one I speak of?" Harry nodded again, clearly confused, "It was quite a disaster. The Basilisk caused a lot of damage to the corridor, it was... a miracle no one died."

"Lockheart?"

"An unfortunate, misfired memory charm with a broken wand caused him to incapacitate himself. He is still at St. Mungo's Hospital recovering." The headmaster's tone suggested that the accident was anything but unfortunate.

"Third year?"

"Ah, that was quite a year. Luckily the Dark Lord was not active." Dumbledore sighed, "Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban to kill Peter Pettigrew."

"Sirius took the blame and was wrongly accused, I already know about that."

"Those four were inseparable. I could not believe that any of them would betray a friend."

"So, it was Remus, Sirius, Peter, and... Neville's Father?"

"Quite the rambunctious lot when they were attending Hogwarts." The Headmaster's voice was wistful and Harry's brows knitted together.

"Thank you for answering my questions."

"Of course, Mr. Potter, my office is always open to you."

"Good day, sir."

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Harry twirled his wand between his fingers, as he lazily watched a Ravenclaw's bottle cap skitter across his desk. They were supposed to be transfiguring bottle caps into spiders, though the class was finding that tuning inanimate objects into animate ones was a bit difficult. Wait until they were turning animals into other animals. Now that was difficult. It was one thing to convince an inanimate object to become animate, but it was a whole other playing field trying to convince one species that it is in fact another.

The same could be said for an animagus transformation. It was only taught in seventh year, and because Harry had not attended Hogwarts his seventh year, he never was given instruction on how to transfigure himself. Between training and fighting a war, Harry didn't have the time to waste on something that was little use against his greatest enemy.

The class was about half over, and Harry dubbed it safe to transfigure his bottle cap. It was a yellow and black bottle cap with the word "Tröegs" on it. It looked like it had at one point been the proud fastener atop a bottle of some obscure alcoholic brew. Harry waved his wand over the cap and quietly recited the incantation when he was sure the professor was not looking. The cap shook slightly and seemed to shrivel up and melt into a spidery shape and with a small curl of smoke, the cap had been transfigured into a spindly yellow and black striped spider. It moved a little and Harry watched it gingerly flex its forelegs. It was very Hufflepuff, he decided.

"Beautiful, Mr. Potter. This is a perfect example of animate transfiguration. Ten points to Hufflepuff." Professor McGonagall bent down to look more closely at the arachnid, taking in the fine details, and looking for anything that might indicate imperfection. "Not even a hint of a logo. I am highly impressed."

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry let the yellow spider crawl slowly up his arm and the Ravenclaw girl seated behind him made a disgusted noise as she leaned away.

"I expect you to perform at this level from now on, Mr. Potter. What ever inspired this improvement in your practical work, you would do well to make certain it continues." Harry just nodded and grinned when the spider's legs crawled lightly over his lips, and even the Professor's face grimaced in distaste.

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McGonagall could not quite place the feeling that the Potter boy gave her. He had always been a quiet boy, always struggling to make a passing grade. There was nothing extraordinary about the child, or at least there never had been until now. It was unnerving the way those green eyes, so dark and yet so brilliant, could cause the small hairs on the back of her neck to stand on end. And Merlin, when that spider skulked over that child's Slytherin-like smirk, Minerva thought her heart had stopped. He was creepy, she thought.

Now, Neville Longbottom. There was a dedicated, semi-normal teenager, with eyes that did not quite look so haunted. The boy-who-lived was a nice boy, a brave Gryffindor that earned good marks and played Quidditch. That boy had every right to look like he had seen horrors, to look like life had beaten him down, to have eyes that could see right through you... but that Potter child... Minerva shivered and resumed marking second year quizzes while she waited for her next class.

How did that boy make Hufflepuff with eyes like his?

And why was he making complicated transfigurations when his marks had been barely adequate from previous years?

Could one summer make such a difference?

Or was he not being challenged enough before?

His skill today had been on par with Miss Granger's and though she was not certain about the number of times Potter had made his attempts, Granger had only need six. Her spider, however, was not nearly as... intricate as the yellow one, but the blame could be laid with the design on the cap, or its age, or even if Granger did not like spiders. One had to imagine, and feel, and know what a spider looks like as they cast the spell, otherwise the final product may turn out with flaws. The most common was the color changes, or in many other cases, the material stayed the same. Hermione Granger's spider had been red and white with a cursive letter 'C' on the abdomen. It looked similar to the pholcidae, or daddy longlegs, and was missing eyes and pincers, but was otherwise animate and though it walked in odd patterns, it was at least not made of metal.

Harry Potter's in comparison was pure brilliance.

Now that she thought about it, the boy's skill was impressive. Perhaps she should think about taking on an apprentice. She knew many full grown wizards that struggled with the details, and if it happened that the boy was just in need of a challenge, then perhaps she could provide him with some extra work to find out where he was at.

If the boy did turn out to be a transfiguration protégé...

But those eyes...

They were worse than the headmaster's.

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Harry could feel the glares from his house mates, but paid them no mind as the little yellow spider made its way from his earlobe to the small indenture between his collar bone and neck.

"Why don't you turn it back? Or at least squish it. Do you actually like it just crawling all over you like that?" Hannah's expression was a mix between spite, awe, and disgust.

"I happen to like it as a spider, and I would rather not kill a living thing."

"It's just a bottle cap, Harry." Wayne said lightly, but his voice held a miffed undertone.

"I hate spiders." Hannah shivered, "you better keep that thing away from me."

"I won't let her leave my person. She is venomous after all." He grinned when he saw the blond girl go very pale. "She won't do anything to you, I promise." There was a tap on his shoulder, and Harry turn to see a few Ravenclaws standing calmly behind him. "Yes?" Harry asked, turning around on the bench so he could face them.

"How did you manage to transfigure your bottle cap like that?"

"I followed instructions..." Harry shrugged and readjusted his glasses.

"So did we, and it took us more than a first try to make it even grow legs."

"You did that on a first try!" Wayne whispered harshly, but Harry ignored him.

"Well, that's part of your problem. You are thinking about the spider as in pieces rather than as being a whole. If you only got legs on the first try, it was because you don't understand that a spider, or any animal, is a living machine. It moves. Fluidly. It lives."

"You must have cheated. You never get anything right on your own."

"It's hard to cheat at magic." Harry said pointedly. "And if you have no proof, then you have no case."

"You just practically admitted it." Another Ravenclaw accused.

"Are you sure you are a Ravenclaw?"

"Are you sure you are a Hufflepuff?" He countered. "More like a snake in badger's clothing." Harry laughed, and the Spider scuttled out from its hiding spot to sit on the top of his head.

"Please don't insult my house," Harry was grinning like an idiot.

"Then don't insult ours."

"I was insulting you, not your house. Now let me eat. When you have proof of my supposed cheating, then I will see you in Dumbledore's office. Until that time, I'd like to get on with my life."

"There's no way you could have-,"

"I am sorry your pride has been so severely crushed over this. Maybe if you studied more-,"

"I don't know how you did it, but I will find out." he growled and Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Good luck then." He turned back to his food effectively dismissing the boy.

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Oh joy.

Harry yawned loudly as Professor Trelawney finished what she thought was a dramatic prediction of the boy-who-lived's imminent death. Gory and disturbing as ever, but Neville just rolled his eyes and put an elbow on the table in front of him. Ron snickered, earning a few glares from Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil. It was almost funny to watch the scene as an outsider instead of being the center of attention.

They were reviewing crystal balls again, something Harry remembered from his 'previous' classes, dully noting that he had hated the crystal gazing even more than the tea leaves. At least one was able to enjoy the tea before staring at and deciphering the meaning of dredges for an hour. Crystal gazing was basically staring at a ball shaped rock for the duration of class time in absolute silence. It was excruciating. But fortunately he found that knowing the future beforehand was quite useful, and also quite entertaining when used to mess with the divination professor.

"Tell me what you see in your crystal ball Mr. Potter." Trelawney asked excitedly. She had been wandering about the room for the

entirety of the hour, asking the students to tell her what they saw, and most of them lied with deep conviction. Harry had chosen a seat next to Ron who said he could see a chess board with a sandwich set on top. Then the redhead proceeded to describe the makings in great detail until the fraud moved on to him. "Go on, give it a try. This time you might see something."

"I see..." Harry paused, and did his best to hide his grin under a mask of confusion and surprise, "I see a goblet. A big one, and it's standing in the Great Hall. People are putting in scraps of paper... Oh... it's night. And is that-," Harry shook his head and looked at the crystal ball as though he could just make out something. "Hmm... Oh and there are lots of pretty girls in blue uniforms. And... Viktor Krum! Wow, he looks like a duck up close!"

"My, my. You must have some hidden talent after all." Trelawney pat his shoulder gently. "The goblet you speak of is the Goblet of Fire, but I must not say more. Fifteen points to Hufflepuff." She stood up and was about to move on to Susan when she let out a frightening shriek, flailing her arms wildly about her body as though possessed. The class fell silent as the Divination professor stumbled around the room in terror. Then Harry saw her, his little spider, dropping to the floor. Her spindly legs weaved this way and that, as if she were trying to direct muggle air traffic... or feebly attempt to fend off her impending doom. Just as Pavarti positioned her foot above the poor defenseless creature, Harry dove in and snatched the spider gently in both hands and took a swift stomp to his back.

"Ow!"

"Ah!"

"Oh! A spider!"

"Kill it!"

"Ron!"

When all had settled into their seats, excluding Ron who had switched places with Neville, the class more or less resumed. However, the lull of boredom that had befallen the class had evaporated, and the air was far more energized with latent magic and adrenalin. At the end of the hour, Trelawney instructed the class

to read the section on planetary movements and star signs before next Wednesday.

On the way out, Neville tapped Harry gently on the shoulder.

"Oh, hi Neville." Harry readjusted his shoulder strap and moved closer to the wall so other students could get by down the stairs, "What's up?"

"Did you really see?" He asked.

"See what? That stuff in the crystal ball?"

"Yeah,"

"Who knows," Harry grinned mischievously.

"What's with the spider?"

"Oh her?" Harry let the little yellow spider crawl onto his hand from its perch on his shoulder. "I dunno. She was my transfiguration project. Where's Ron?"

"Over here," came a small voice, "I'll be staying away from that monster, thank you very much." He was up the stairs a ways and was gripping the banister tightly.

"Not a fan of arachnids?" Harry smiled sympathetically.

"He's deathly afraid of spiders." Neville leaned over and whispered.

"Ah... So I have ammunition for future ventures."

"What kind of Hufflepuff are you?" Ron asked horrified.

"I was just kidding." Harry laughed, "That would be cruel, and what makes you think I'd subject a poor little spider to you?"

"Poor little spider my arse." Ron grumbled, but then he paused and finally understood, "Hey!" A long moment of awkward silence passed between the three boys, with Neville looking at him as though he had never seen a guy before, and Ron, well, his eyes were trained on Harry's yellow, eight-legged friend.

"I'll see you around." Harry smiled and began his trek down the spiraling stairs.

"S-see you," Neville called after him a bit late. Harry mentally rolled his eyes and kept walking. The yellow spider crawled over his ear lobe and tickled his skin in an almost sympathetic manner.

Chapter 6: Affection

Harry was seriously considering dropping Muggle Studies. Not only was he subject to listen to the professor droning on and on about muggle appliances and their mechanisms, he was also forced to endure it in the company of Slytherins, namely one Draco Malfoy who looked irritated that he was even present in this classroom.

"A telephone is an ingenious way in which Muggles can communicate with each other. Does anyone want to tell me some advantages or disadvantages to the muggle telephone?" Harry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. The professor was a bubbly woman he did not know the name of. She was quite young, maybe in her twenties, attractive but not overly so. A moment passed, and Harry looked about the room. No one seemed to want to answer. A sigh escaped his lips, and if he had an inner voice, he thought it would be telling him to just keep still and not draw attention to himself. But the question was so easy, it made it impossible to resist. "Yes, Mr. Potter." the professor beamed at him, delighted that someone was actually participating and not drooling over their notes.

"A telephone can be used over vast distances, connecting people in a matter of second. It might take a day or more for an owl to travel an equal distance. One can floo in relatively the same amount of time, and also enter a dwelling through the same network, giving fire travel the advantage in speed of locating to another's house or establishment. On the other hand, a telephone allows a person to leave a message if the other person is not home, and is a far cleaner way of communicating." Harry finished and discovered that the entire classroom had gone quiet, not that it had not been quite before, but now it was an intense, waiting quite. The professor's mouth was agape as were several of his classmates. He caught Draco's eye and saw pure disgust and astonishment, as though he might have been grudgingly impressed. Harry blushed, thinking maybe he should have kept his hand down. "Is that right?" Harry asked sheepishly, trying to slide further into his chair.

"My goodness, Mr. Potter." Her voice was filled with surprise and pleasure, "You've been studying, I see."

"Er... yes ma'am." He offered a small smile while mentally berating him self.

"Maybe he's planning on becoming a Muggle." An anonymous Slytherin quipped and a few others giggled.

"Now, now," The professor calmed the class, "Mr. Potter, I will award Hufflepuff house fifteen points if you can recite five different modes of transportation that we do not use in the magical world."

"Oh... alright, um... air plane, helicopter... submarine... er..." Harry was running through all of the ways muggles traveled, and he didn't think he could count a car, bus or motorcycle, even if it was originally a muggle invention, because he had seen enchanted ones before, not that they were common. "Jet ski and... a... hang glider," He grinned.

"And just what is a hang glider?" The professor asked skeptically. Harry decided that she was not a muggle born, in any case.

"It is a flying machine," Harry shrugged raising his wand. He drew an image in the air letting the shimmering outline fly around the classroom before swooping over to the professor, "Not the most common form of muggle travel, but no wizards ever used one to my knowledge."

"Perhaps, Potter should teach the class." And Harry scowled as he heard Draco Malfoy finally speak in his ever familiar drawl. "He knows more about muggles than you, Professor."

"Where did you hear about a hang glider?" She ignored Draco, obviously far more curious about the muggle contraption she had never heard of. Her and Mr. Weasley would have gotten on rather well, Harry mused.

"I er..." Harry racked his brains for a suitable lie. He couldn't say he read it in a book. If the other Harry had grown up in the muggle world like he had done, than this would not have been a problem. He was saved from answering however when Draco interrupted him again.

"Who cares? Hang gliders aren't going to be on the test, are they?"

"Oh... no, Mr. Malfoy, they will not." She shook her head and then continued the lecture. Her happy demeanor had been thoroughly snuffed out by Draco's harsh commentary. Harry was surprised that

Draco did not get house points deducted, and how timid the woman had gone. Was she frightened of the little ferret?

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As soon as the class let out, Harry hurried to try his hand at researching time travel in the library again. If Hermione was there however, he needed to have a back up plan. He wasn't stupid enough to think she had forgotten his little display of wandless magic. He also was counting on Hermione's good sense not to blurt out Draco's ancestry to Ron or Neville, either of which would waste no time in holding it over the Slytherin's head without thinking of the consequences.

Of course, there she was, seated at the table she always used, reading some obscure text, hair falling on either side of her face. Harry's mind raced, trying to think of a subject of interest other than time travel. Discretely, he disappeared into an isle of books and perused the titles.

As luck would have it, Ron happened to be looking through the same isle, and smiled nervously before walking over.

"Hey, Potter," He stayed a fair distance away, "Ah... that spider..."

"She's somewhere in my hair I think, but don't worry, she's not going to touch you, I promise."

"Er..." He took a step back, "So how's it going? You're taking muggle studies right?" Harry nodded.

"We were just let out, and there was time before dinner, so I thought I'd make a trip to the library... find something to entertain myself."

"You call reading entertainment?" Ron looked like he might choke. Harry grinned and glanced over his shoulder at Hermione.

"Not to her extent, I think," When he looked back, he saw Ron frown, as though he was trying to decide if Harry was insulting her or not. Quick to put out any potential fires, Harry added, "I could never have that dedication or passion for books the way she has. But when I have nothing better to do with my time... books are all I have." The frown on Ron's face only grew though, and then Harry realized his

mistake. He was practically begging for a Gryfindor pity party. Nothing better to do... why did I say that? Now he's going to ask me for a game of exploding snap or-

"So what are you looking for?"

"Oh... er, I was thinking," And he was thinking, very fast, in fact, "animagus transformations and advanced transfiguration maybe... I did a really good job on my spider in class and I thought it might be something I'd be good at."

"But we're only fourth years,"

"Oh... well I was just interested in the theory..."

"What are you a Ravenclaw? Or are you and Hermione playing a joke on me?" Ron asked suspiciously, and Harry couldn't help but laugh, quietly as he could, behind his hand.

"Okay... so I really think being able to transform into an animal would be really cool, but I don't even know where to begin. I'm pants at researching."

"Maybe Hermione would help." Ron offered.

"Or maybe she'll just reprimand me..."

"Help with what?" Harry whipped around, back against the book shelf, staring at Hermione in shock.

"Don't do that," Harry hissed, berating himself for having almost cursed her. He had to remember that he was not facing Voldemort or his minions in battle. He was currently at Hogwarts, surrounded by mostly harmless students and staff. Mostly.

"Well, excuse me. Next time I'll make sure to make enough noise to irritate Madame Pince so you will hear me coming." She huffed, irritated.

"Uhn, no... no, I'm sorry, I just... um, I didn't mean to snap at you."

"Yes, well..." She folded her arms expectantly.

"Er... Potter was just talking about wanting to look up stuff on animagus transformations."

"Yeah..." Harry smiled sheepishly, "The... time travel thing didn't work out... so I thought I'd move on to something new."

"Well, any books on animagus transfiguration can be found in the restricted section. Oh, but there was one or two books that covered some of the basic theory and beginning steps. Nothing overly detailed, but it's a start. Here, I'll help you find them." She tapped her fingers against her arm for a moment, trying to remember where it was in her catalogue of a brain, and then she made a small noise, like an 'ah,' before striding out of the isle and disappearing into the maze of books. Harry and Ron waited, and decided to sit down at the table while Hermione searched.

"So what's Longbottom up to? Why isn't he paling around with you guys?" Harry whispered as Madame Pince walked by, giving them a look.

"He should be here pretty soon. Snape was keeping him after again, the greasy git." Ron scowled, "That slimy snake will do anything to get Neville in trouble."

"He is rather snarky sometimes." Harry sighed, "That man could hold a grudge 'til the end of time." His eyes widened when a stack of books was dropped in front of him on the table. There had to be at least seven of them.

"That should hold you until you ask a professor for access to the restricted section." Hermione smiled. "I took the liberty of finding some other advanced transfiguration text so you could compare the theory and practical applications between them."

"Y-you... are really..." He swallowed, not knowing exactly what he wanted to say. "Thank you. I would never have found those without some help."

"Don't mention it." She sat down across from Harry, next to Ron. "What do you think your animal is, if you have one?"

"I dunno..." Harry shrugged, "I didn't really think about it before."

"I think I'd want something that was big and ferocious, like a lion."

"Or something useful, like a bird. And Ron, you're such a boy. There is nothing practical about being able to transform into a lion."

"Sure there is!" He said defensively, "Think about who we hang out with, and then try and tell me that something big and scary wouldn't be dead useful."

"Yeah, but wouldn't it be better to have something that was also able to spit venom or otherwise subdue an opponent? Take an Acromantula for example-," Ron turned a sickly pale color, "Er... or a-,"

"You can't be a magical creature, or rather it is really, really rare." Hermione frowned.

"Oh. Well, I didn't know that." Harry grinned sheepishly. "Er... Sorry R- Weasley. I'll try not to bring up spiders..." The red head nodded in relief, and Hermione reached over and pat his arm sympathetically.

"Hey guys," Neville slumped into a seat next to Harry, and pulled out his potions book. "Sorry I took so long, I-,"

Harry shrugged and stood up. "I should be getting back to Hufflepuff. Thank you Granger, you really helped me out a lot."

"Oh, you don't have to leave-," Neville frowned, confused.

"It was nice talking to you," Harry grabbed the massive pile of books and went to go check them out, ignoring the stares boring holes in his back. Left to idle chatting, Harry was certain Hermione would start questioning him subtly about things he couldn't divulge. There was no reason to stay now, either. His original conquest for time travel had been foiled. "Well... at least there is dinner to look forward to." He sighed, setting the books down in front of the ornery librarian, who wrote his name in the register, eyeing him all the while.

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Once out of the library, Harry cast a feather weight charm on the books and walked quickly back to the Hufflepuff dorms.

After dinner, Harry walked out onto the grounds. It was raining; heavy drops falling in a torrent of sound and cold drenched his thick cloak within seconds, seeping through every last layer of fabric until the water reached his skin. Removing his glasses, he closed his eyes and let his head fall back. Magic, smooth and quiet strength, rushed about the grounds, as though welcoming a friend or lover, and Harry gave himself away to the presence falling back onto the grass.

The landing was slow, soft and felt like floating as the magic cushioned him, pulling and slipping along his arms and legs. Harry laughed, giving himself over to the water and earth, not minding his robes becoming caked with mud and leaves. Power, free and wild ran over and under his skin, and Harry could only sigh in contentment as he was carried away by the magic.

When he opened his eyes, the rain had settled into a drizzle and he was lying on his back in a puddle of muddy water and grass. He felt giddy but over tired, the magic still mingling with his hair and tickling his arms and fingers. It was very dark, and Harry wondered if he would make curfew or not.

There was no need to worry however. The halls were still very well lit, and the tempus charm he cast declared that he still had a half hour before curfew. He had walked no more than five steps when a grouchy looking tabby caught his eye. Then he looked down at his mud-caked appearance.

"Bugger," Harry flicked his wrist and the mud on the floor was gone and the bottom seven inches of his body was dry and clean in hopes of keeping Filch's temper at bay. He didn't feel like being completely clean just yet. The water and mud, though cold and dirty, felt good, and he would wash in the shower when he returned to the dorms.

Filch's cat slinked away, purring in approval, but the paintings on the walls sneered at him as he staggered past.

"Playing Quidditch in the rain, boy?"

"Oh, what a dreadful child, clean your face at once!"

"His robes are filthy."

"He looks like he crawled out of the rubbish bin."

And Harry just yawned and laughed quietly as he staggered past.

"Harry!" Wayne's voice pulled Harry out of his daze, waving a hand in front of him, trying to grab his attention. "What happened to you? Are you..." Wayne looked at him in shock, "Are you drunk?" And Harry swayed, shook his head no and leaned into the Hufflepuff boy.

"Nope... not drunk." Harry giggled as he felt the magic brush across his stomach, "Well... not on alcohol anyway... be a friend and help me to the showers. I could probably do it myself... but-," Harry giggled again, into the boy's shoulder, "but it's really starting to hit me hard... I might fall asleep in the shower." He hummed.

"Here, I'll cast a cleaning spell, and then you can just-,"

"Nah, I want a shower."

"Harry-,"

"Please, Wayne?" He whined, "Just make sure I come out in twenty minutes, okay?"

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The shower was scalding, and Harry hissed in pain when the magic burned at his skin, but it quickly turned icy, and then lukewarm, as if apologizing. Harry just shrugged it off, but was starting to sober up. Muddy water swirled down the drain.

"You okay, Harry?"

"Yeah, 'm still alive." Harry called back. His body felt bone weary, heavy, and all he wanted was to fall asleep. Wayne was waiting by the door looking nervous. "Thanks for waiting. I'm dead tired..."

"Harry... what happened to you?"

"Magic." Harry sniggered into his hand as though it were some private joke.

"Do you want to go see the nurse?" Wayne steadied Harry as they walked towards boy's fourth year dorm room.

"What's wrong with Harry this time?" Justin took one of Harry's arms and helped Wayne carry him over to his bed.

"I think he's drunk."

"I'm nah-," Harry was interrupted by a yawn, "I was just outside,"

"Do me a favor Harry?" Justin and Wayne dropped him onto his bed and pulled off of his shoes. "Say 'Hufflepuff has happy hats.' Can you do that?" Justin leaned over so his face was no more than an inch away from Harry's.

"Are you going to kiss me?" Harry grimaced, but Justin just gave him a look, "Hufflepuff has... happy hats... hands... cats..." Harry trailed off.

"Well, I don't smell alcohol, but that doesn't mean he didn't manage to charm the smell away either."

"Promise, no alcohol," Harry murmured, then drifted off to sleep.

XXXXXXX

Thursday blurred into Friday, and today Harry had Care of Magical Creatures with the Ravenclaws. The grounds were still soggy from the past two days of pouring rain and made sloshing noises when he walked. The Hufflepuffs all left breakfast together, making their way as a group down to Hagrid's cabin. Wayne kept to Harry's left, cautiously observing him. He ignored the glance, finding it easier to concentrate on trudging forward through the mud. It sucked on his feet, like a playful joke, and Harry saw that no one else was having problems walking. He glared half-heartedly at the ground and sighed.

"Feeling up to more blast-ended skrewts?" Wayne asked.

"Of course," Harry quipped, "I'm always looking for new ways to burn my robes to cinders." Wayne laughed.

"Yeah. Professor Hagrid isn't really the best instructor."

"I think he forgets that we aren't as big and as strong as he is." Harry smiled fondly at the memory of Hagrid busting down the door to that shoddy old shack by the sea and brandishing his umbrella at his relatives. Hagrid had given him his first cake, and had told him that he was a wizard. But he supposed this was not quite the same Hagrid he knew.

"Alrigh' then," Hagrid ushered the students over to begin the lesson. "This lesson, we're goin' ta look at flubber worms. The, er... blast-ended skrewts are a bit dangerous for forth years ta be handlin' so... sorry 'bout last week, 'Arry."

"It's fine," Harry said casually. "I learned something after all."

"Righ'... good lad," And then Hagrid proceeded to lecture about flobberworms, putting even the most studious Ravenclaws in a mindless daze.

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Lunch was focused around Hannah Abbot and her new witch's wireless, like a wizard's wireless, but with special features which she described in great detail. Harry picked at his food and wondered how he was going to make it through the next class without hexing the Death Eater professor, or just killing him. He had completed his essay on the unforgivable curses, and he knew he would get an Outstanding.

"Let's get going." Wayne nudged Harry's shoulder, "You're lucky you missed the last class. He used the imperious curse on everyone."

"I can imagine," Harry scowled and followed Wayne out of the Hall. "I'm sure it was... enlightening"

"None of us told you what actually happened in the class did we?" The boy gave Harry a rough idea of what had happened, and how Draco couldn't throw off the imperious and had been forced to lick Susan's shoes before professor Moody took it off him."

"You should have seen what he made Hopkins do," A low voice drawled in his ear, and Harry felt Draco's hand slip into his empty robe pocket and back out again, "He was leaping onto the

professor's desk and declaring his love to Millicent Bulstrode." Wayne flushed a deep red, and Harry looked at the blond coolly.

"I don't think either is very funny. I don't like him." Harry let his hand slip discretely into his pocket and he felt a scrap of paper. "Don't you have someone else to bother?"

"Of course," Draco sneered and stalked off.

"That was almost pleasant of him." Harry remarked casually when the Slytherin was out of range.

"I can't believe that guy. What a wanker."

"Millicent isn't ugly, you know." Harry pointed out jokingly. "I mean, she's not breathtaking or anything, but she isn't so bad." Wayne's pink tinge returned with a vengeance.

"He's still a wanker."

"That's just Slytherin affection."

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Upon entering the classroom Moody glared at him, like he would glare at any half-blood. 'Superior bastard,' Harry's sneer was worthy of a Malfoy, and he took a seat behind Wayne.

"Mr. Potter." The fake moody leered at him, "Did you manage to complete the assignment?"

"Yes sir." Harry pulled out the parchment from his bag and stood, carefully handing it over to the man.

"I don't believe you were able to gain the practical experience from the last class, so we will take a quick moment to review. Imperious."

Harry felt the familiar cloud of fog settle over him, and he promptly threw it off. It was silly really when Moody told him to write 'I love professor Snape' on the blackboard. Harry smiled to himself as he walked up to the blackboard and began to write. But instead of declaring his undying love for the potions master, he wrote:

'Unforgivable cursed are illegal and immoral. Professor Moody is no better than a Dea-,'

The chalk exploded in his hand and the writing was vanished. Harry calmly turned to face Barty Crouch Jr. The Death Eater's right eye twitched and his tongue darted out to lick his lips, a nervous twitch Moody did not possess.

"Very well done, Mr. Potter," He said gruffly, "When did you break it?"

"As I felt it descend, sir," Harry's smile was eerie and knowing.

"Twenty points to Hufflepuff." The fake Moody nodded. When Harry felt the subtle probing of Legilimency at his shields he raised an eyebrow and mentally threw the bastard out, no longer smiling. Moody nodded again and waved him back to his seat. "Now then, everyone has felt the effects of one unforgivable. Everyone had felt the touch of dark magic." He droned on, and by no means was he a boring teacher, but Harry wasn't overly in need of a lecture on dueling skills. Instead of paying attention, Harry reached inside his robe pocket and pulled out the scrap of paper Draco stuffed in his pocket.

Snape's office 7pm

It was a short note, and Harry wondered what Draco might want. A duel in Snape's office? Certainly not. Perhaps he wanted to talk to him about his veela blood. That was most likely. He glanced over at the blond. His face pale with a trained expression, the only giveaway was the glamour charm hiding the dark circles that were presumably beneath.

'So vain,' Harry thought.

Fake Moody paired them off to practice casting shield charms and stinging hexes. Harry was paired with Draco, and Harry wondered why it was always him he was partnered with, and never anyone else. It was almost like fate was picking on him.

"I'll be hexing first, I think," Draco brushed past him to stand at an appropriate distance to cast a spell. Harry just shrugged and went along with it. It wasn't like the little snot could land a curse anyway.

About three minutes into the exercise, Draco was getting frustrated. Harry's severely weakened stinging hexes broke through nearly all of Draco's shield charms, and the Slytherin had failed to land even one hex.

It was not long before Harry felt Draco incant a different spell under his breath so he couldn't hear what it was, but that didn't matter. The curse Draco threw at him was borderline dark, but wouldn't get him expelled. It was designed to eat through protego shields like termites through wood, but faster, and once the magic consumes it, the curse locks onto the person's magical signature and bites one hundred times leaving one hundred small welts over the entire body. Harry knew better than to erect a shield, and he could not dodge it or it would hit another student.

Luckily, the effect of biting insects only occurs if there was a shield in the first place. Instead the curse would simply score him once across the face, like receiving a slap by someone who wore a ring maybe. The curse itself was invented by a pureblood witch when she discovered her husband was having an affair with her sister.

A streak of red was carved into his cheek, and he hissed, glaring at Draco with contempt. The blond looked disappointed at the result. In return, Harry sent a wave of magic, like a heavy hand, and smacked Draco in kind.

"Ow," Draco rubbed the reddening skin under his eye, "That hurt,"

"Fair is fair, Malfoy," Harry wiped the blood with his thumb, smearing the red line into a larger and messier one. "Next time you try something like that, I'll retaliate with more than a slap."

"It not fair you're good at shield charms and I'm not." He pouted, without pouting, as only a Malfoy could do.

"You aren't bad at them," Harry offered, but then smiled almost evilly, "I'm just that much stronger than you."

Draco's glare oozed superiority, as if daring Harry to prove his statement, but before the idiot could even think of challenging him to an all out duel, Barty Crouch descended upon them, brandishing his wand at Draco.

"You foul rodent, using a curse like that will get you a detention wi-,"

"It's quite alright professor," Harry interrupted, "I goaded him into it, and no one got hurt." Harry looked him straight in the eye, as if daring him to try a legilimens. Fake Moody growled, not understanding why Harry was bothering to put out for a Malfoy, and maybe a bit wary of angering him. 'I know your secret' Harry thought behind his heavy occlumency shields. "It won't happen again."

"Ten points from Hufflepuff for provocation. And thirty points from Slytherin for using an underhanded curse during lessons where if Potter hadn't recognized it, he would be inflicted with severe pain. You will do no such thing in my class again, boy, or I will have you every night for detention for a month."

Harry raised an eyebrow at Barty's implied definition of severe pain. Severe pain was a crucio or watching someone you care for being murdered in front of you. Severe pain was not a couple of welts, not even one hundred. Severe pain was suffering effects of a poison, or having your arm pressed against the stove for burning the bacon. Barty Crouch was, is, a Death Eater. He ought to know the meaning of true pain from Voldemort himself.

Draco interrupted Harry's morbid musings by tapping him on the arm.

"Class is over." He said, making sure of acknowledgement before grabbing his things to leave, "See you." Harry watched him leave.

"Prat,"

Chapter 7: Interrogation

Harry raced down the hallways towards the dungeons. He was running late because that misguided idiot, Zechariahs Smith, dragged him into a debate, more of an argument, about the importance of blood and what makes pure bloods different than half-bloods and muggle-born witches and wizards. The debate had gotten very heated and it took the paper that Draco stuffed in his pocket to start on fire and burn a hole through his trousers before he realized he was late and there was no time to be fiddling around for burn-healing paste.

No, instead he was stampeding down the hallway, kicking himself for not setting an alarm or something less painful to remind him of his appointment with the youngest Malfoy. At least if he had set an alarm, he would not have already been late.

By the time he made it to Snape's Office, it was seven sixteen and Draco was walking back towards the Slytherin Common room.

"Malfoy!" Harry called, "Malfoy, I'm sorry I'm late. Please wait." He was breathing hard, skin flushed, hair in disarray. Then again, when was it not?

Draco turned. His expression was unreadable, giving away nothing. Harry bent over his knees, trying to catch his breath. "Wait... I really am sorry... I was... well, you probably don't care about excuses."

"No, we don't Mr. Potter,"

Harry whirled around

"S-sir,"

"I would like you and Mr. Malfoy to please step into my office. I have some questions for both of you." Snape turned and stalked back into his office, not glancing back to make certain he was followed. Harry pulled down his shield and looked over his shoulder at Draco.

"Shall we?" His voice sounded breathy to his ears, and he winced when Draco walked past him into the office without a word.

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"How did you come by this knowledge," Snape interrogated Harry, frustration creeping into his voice.

"I really can't tell you that, sir." Harry looked at the floor, not really wanting to witness the man's anger inevitably boil over.

"This is dangerous information, Mr. Potter," Snape hissed, his face now uncomfortably close, "People will die over this information."

"Not necessarily. I doubt the dark lord would outright kill him. I think he would be more likely to use Malfoy for... well, the guy can't be getting any, at least not consensually... maybe Bellatr-,"

"That. Is. Enough." Snape grabbed his shoulder, hard, and slammed him none too gently into the back of the chair. "I will not have you making light of this situation." Harry flinched away from the touch as Draco watched the show from a seat not far away.

"Then don't let him become a Death Eater!" Harry snapped at the potions master, "It will manifest, whether he wants it to or not. Voldemort will either kill him or use him, because he will never accept a magical creature as his servant."

"But I want to serve him!" Draco challenged.

"You actually want to serve a raving half-blood bent on world domination and finding a cure for mortality?"

"He is fighting for the preservation of our world!" Draco argued, "And he is a pureblood!"

"That's just his pretext for using your family's wealth and resources for his own means. And he is too a half-blood. His real name is Tom Marvolo Riddle," And here Harry whipped out his wand and wrote the Dark Lord's name in the air, as a parody to his memory, rearranging the letters so they spelled 'I am Lord Voldemort' in glaring green script. "Look him up. He went to Hogwarts a little over fifty years ago. He is a Half-blood. You know I'm right."

"Mr. Potter! I demand to know where-,"

"You don't have to change what you believe in," Harry interrupted Snape with a surprisingly soft tone. "I may not agree with your political views, but I won't ostracize you for them. You have a right to your own opinion, and I can only hope that I might someday be able to change your mind. The Dark Lord will not win."

"You sound like you are certain." Draco looked like he was beginning to give in.

"I am."

"Severus?" Draco looked up at Snape with a lost expression, as though he were looking for guidance. Snape merely looked back at him blankly. Draco let his face fall into his hands, "I don't think I can. I'll be disowned... I'll be killed."

"Professor..." Harry ventured, "The note Draco sent me burned my leg... would it be alright if I used some paste from your stores? I'll replace it of course."

"I will get it for you, Mr. Potter." Snape said gruffly, glad to leave the room with the excuse, "No need for you to destroy my cabinets." And he was gone.

"Draco..." Harry said softly, "you are a Slytherin-,"

"Oh! Yes, good observation; you already have everything figured out, don't you. I'm just a slimy snake-,"

"You are misunderstanding me. I'm not insulting you. I was simply speaking in Slytherin terms. Now let me finish. Your parents may or may not disown you, but to stay with the Dark Lord is to sign yourself over for life. He will make living painful, and you will not be able to escape. Dumbledore can offer you protection-,"

"I will not follow that barmy old coot,"

"I'm not asking you to. But you could appeal to him for refuge. I am certain he would not deny you."

"Telling me to take the coward's way out?" Draco mocked, "What kind of Hufflepuff are you, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be all for loyalty?" Harry shrugged.

"You have not given your self to Tom yet, you haven't picked your side. But now that you know... about your new blood status, it might be a good idea to plan ahead and choose a path that you might at least survive, mind and body intact. The question is really your life or the Dark Lord, I think. And you will have to think carefully about what your family's reaction will be to your manifestation. Do you think they would disown you anyway? Do you think your mother will be murdered as well, for lying?"

"She would never lie about something like that!" Draco defended his mother rigorously.

"To keep her self alive?" Harry challenged, "Or maybe she doesn't know..." He conceded, "Either way, you must choose."

"Severus... he'd kill me if I told him I didn't want to serve," Draco was pulling at his hair.

"I think you might find that he would do no such thing. His position is one that does not allow him to move so freely. He can do nothing to you here. I promise you that." Harry would not outright tell Draco that Snape was working against the Dark Lord, just in case he turned back to Voldemort later. "I know you aren't ready to make such a large decision, but life doesn't... it is not always fair. Rather than ignoring the problem, I think you should try to make a choice."

"You want me to follow that right old codger-,"

"Yes, because I'd rather see you safe than hurt."

"Why do you care what happens anyway?" Draco narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"I don't believe you are a bad person. I don't think you are a Death Eater who kills and torments innocent people."

"They're not innocent-,"

"Of what crime are they so egregiously harming you that you must torture and murder them?"

"They are ruining our way of life! They are destroying our traditions."

"No, you, and all of the purebloods are destroying your own traditions, by wasting your time worrying about muggleborns and half-bloods, and by committing crimes and being sent to prison, by wallowing in your self-importance and arrogance and superiority. Your power struggle is going to send pureblood society into ruins on its own." Harry's fingers curled tightly into the palms of his hands, nails digging in to his skin. "There are better ways to get what you want, Draco. You are smart, find a way to preserve your traditions without the addition of torture and murder, and I think you will go farther than Voldemort will ever go." Draco flinched at the name, "You are better than that."

"If... Are you on Dumbledore's side?" Draco asked hesitantly.

"Well... I..." Harry thought about it. Did the Dumbledore in this time count? He wasn't sure yet if he trusted the man like he used to, and the fact that Harry had been living for the past few years with nothing but his memory for guidance, he had grown independent of his influence. "Well, I don't know. He isn't infallible... but he does his best, and I agree to most of what he believes in..."

"Are you on his side? Would you die for him?" Draco asked seriously, "Would I be expected to bow to him? Are you? Are you in a formal alliance with the Headmaster?"

"Formal-?" Harry balked, "Hold on a minute. Dumbledore isn't going to ask you to-," he sighed, trying to figure out what Draco was on about. Harry had never needed to consider alliances before. At least not in political terms... "I am under no oath to serve him, if that's what you are after. I haven't been under circumstances that would force me to take a side."

"If I do... If I go to Dumbledore... he would help me? Even if I'm disowned, I would still be safe, right?"

"Yes."

"I'll be poorer than a Weasley." Draco ran a hand through his hair.

"You will be provided for." Harry reassured him.

"What about the Slytherins?" the boy looked scared, "A lot of them have parents who-,"

"I know," Harry said, "None of them need to know right away... and if... if you are able, you might try subtly convincing them... that Voldemort-,"

"Don't say his name!"

"-is a madman, and not worth their effort." Harry grinned at the resigned expression on the boy's face.

Suddenly, the door to the office creaked open, and Snape walked in, carrying a jar of burn-healing paste. Draco nodded to him, but did not look directly at him, Harry noted this, and Snape probably did as well.

"Let's see that burn, Mr. Potter." Snape looked at him, with something like interest, or maybe perplexity.

"Er... it's... it's on my upper leg... I can do it myself-,"

"Where you will no doubt apply it wrong and destroy something of value in the process." Snape interrupted, "Pants off, Potter, or you can have Madame Pomfrey take a look."

"No way, she'd just try to keep me over night!" Harry complained.

"Then, I suggest you removed those garments and let me take a look."

"But Malfoy-,"

"I'm a guy, Potter."

"And I need to speak with Mr. Malfoy after you leave, so he will be staying."

"I feel like I'm being set up," Harry grumbled, standing up to unbutton his trousers. Cool air hit his knees, and he shivered, pulling the hem of his boxers up just below his hip, exposing the larger than expected burn. There was very little blood, as the wound had been cauterized, but the burn looked as though it were spreading slowly.

The holes in his robe pocket, trousers, and boxers were no bigger than a grape, but the burn on his leg was at least the size of a snitch, maybe even a little larger.

"This is unusual." Snape pulled the hem of his boxers down to observe the damage to the cloth, "Draco, what spell did you use on the paper?"

"Um... I used a normal reminder charm."

"Which one?"

"The pin pricking one, so it pokes you if you are late."

"Then, there should have been no burn in the first place. You are certain you correctly incanted the spell-,"

"Professor, it's okay, it's not that big of a deal." Harry frowned at the burn. Had it gotten larger? Gently, he let his fingers trace the outer edges.

"Don't aggravate it, Potter." Snape removed the hand and allowed his own to repeat the action, his cool finger traced the outer edge and the man's hand stopped, "I don't recognize this magic."

"Sir?" Harry shifted his weight.

"It isn't... it has a strange feel."

"Ah." Harry knew then what had happened. He had been neglecting the fire element quite a lot, and perhaps it was feeling jealous? 'I was not aware the fire element cared so much' he thought ruefully. It wasn't like fire to feel left out. Fire was a difficult element, and in Harry's experience, which was not much, it had never paid him much attention before. Why now? The burn throbbed, eating away the layers of skin. "The paste sir?" Harry urged, not taking his eyes away from the burn.

"I am not certain if that is a wise decision. It might react badly."

"It will be fine, sir." Harry sighed impatiently. This meant that he would be plagued with fire if he didn't find some way to calm it, or persuade it into indifference.

"I remember you whining about boils just last year." Snape hesitantly applied the paste, and Harry sighed in relief.

"Yes... well, I've been trying to be less of an obnoxious child, if you will. I think I learned a few lessons... over the summer." And by 'summer' Harry meant his life back in his world. Snape said nothing and quietly closed the jar, allowing Harry to redress him self.

"I am looking forward to seeing what you have learned." He looked at Harry oddly, with an expression completely devoid of hate. He looked much nicer than Harry would have thought possible, but then when ever his Snape looked at him, there was always the subtle loathing in the nearly always prominent scowl. This Snape was kinder looking, without the veil of hatred and bitter resentment focused on his father's memory. It was like a miracle. "You may leave."

"S-sir?" Draco interjected quietly, and flushed when it came out a stutter. A Malfoy never stutters. "Can Potter stay?"

"I do not think the information I am about to share with you is appropriate for his ears." Snape said smoothly. Harry snorted, and cleared his throat as if to cover up the slip of laughter. The glare Snape leveled him with was mean enough to make Harry wistful.

"I think... Malfoy believes that if he is left alone in a room with a Death Eater when he is wavering in his loyalties, said sycophant might decide on... rather more Unforgivable methods of persuasion."

"I do not appreciate the terminology, Potter." Snape warned, "Be very careful about what you are insinuating."

"Oh. My apologies," Harry held up his hands in surrender, but didn't sound sorry at all, "I was simply explaining what Malfoy is too proud to admit. He's scared, because he-,"

"Shut-up, Potter." Draco growled.

"Well, if you don't want me here, I can certainly leave," Harry stood, watching Draco's eyes widen fractionally in fear. It always brought joy to his heart to torment him; just a little. As Draco was about to

start fretting again, Harry interrupted before furthering the boy's embarrassment, "Don't worry. He wouldn't hurt you."

"I would hope you do not consider me harmless, Mr. Potter." the man sneered, "I can certainly convince you otherwise." Harry just grinned, as if the entire world were a game.

"I don't think I'd like you for an enemy," Harry shrugged, "But, you aren't, so there's nothing to worry about is there."

"Where are you getting your information?" Snape snapped, suddenly showing his anger. Harry hesitated, glancing at Draco. Some things Draco could be allowed to over hear, but in this case, Harry did not think it wise to speak freely, "I can not say, sir." Harry glanced at the far wall where it met the stone floor. He was taken by surprise when his arm was wrenched and his body was tugged hard to the side. Almost immediately, his magic flared around him, repelling Snape's presence like a magnet, and then holding his body still as if in a standing body bind.

"Sir, please don't... grab me like that." Harry rubbed his arm and released his hold on the professor. "You need only ask me to accompany you." Snape was glaring at him wide eyed, as if seeing him for the first time.

"You will come with me, then." Snape felt a shiver run down his spine as he felt Harry's power. It was not at all like any normal wizard's, almost cognizant, aware of itself. As though Harry did not command with only his will. "In fact Draco, we will speak of this later, perhaps with the Headmaster. You are not to discuss anything that's happened here this evening with anyone but my self or Dumbledore. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Then please see me after breakfast tomorrow morning."

"Yes sir." And Draco stood to leave, giving Harry a look that asked if he'd be alright alone. Harry nodded almost imperceptively, but he knew Snape would have noticed the exchange.

"I'll be fine." Harry smiled a grimace, "Maybe we can talk later too?" Draco nodded and then left.

"How are you getting your information?" Snape began to drill him once again. The man would not stop asking that question, repeating it like a broken record.

"I have told you, I can not say. I can tell you that the information I have is from a dead man," and depending on how you look at it, it could be considered completely true. Dumbledore, Snape, Moody, Shacklebolt, Sirius, Lupin... everyone from the Order Harry knew, was as good as dead, gone from him and this world at any rate.

"What exactly do you know of my... position?" He spoke cautiously.

"I know you are loyal to the Order, to Dumbledore. I know you spy on the Dark Lord. I know that you will do everything you can to protect Draco."

"Who have you told?"

"I will tell no one," Harry said gravely serious, "I do understand the importance and the danger to you and to others. I understand that many people will die if that knowledge passes my lips." Snape looked at him, and Harry could almost guess what was going through his head, and though Harry could not discern his thoughts from his expressionless face, he had known the man long enough, he supposed, knowing how paranoid he was, his mannerisms, his biases, his motivations... He was probably wondering how he could force Harry to swear an unbreakable vow, but since Harry was fourteen, that was against the law. Now he was probably considering an obliviate or trying to use legilimency to mess with his memories. Not that Harry would ever allow that. But Snape must have realized there was nothing legal he could do at the moment.

"How did you perform that repelling magic earlier?" He asked then.

"Reflex... Sorry, sir" Harry nervously scratched the back of his head. He really didn't want Snape to pry into his magic. But of course that was just what he was going to do.

"Why is your magic different? I barely recognize it as your own."

"That is because... it is not completely my own anymore."

"Explain," Snape took a seat behind his desk, and gestured for Harry to also take a seat.

"I suppose I can tell you, if you keep it mostly to yourself. It isn't something that people can't know about, but rather if they did... I might not... um...it's a bit hard to explain." Harry sighed, "I am not exactly a wizard anymore... More of a...mage really. But maybe that's not the right word... a... listener, ausculto or something? But most people call it a mage. My magic is not the same as yours. Mine isn't really all mine. The magic is... conscious. I can command it as a wizard does, but it can need a bit of persuasion, say, if I were to call on more magic than what I have. Or, if I neglect it... it may leave me, or punish me as it wishes, leaving me a squib, suffocating me, burning me... So far I've managed not to bore it, or anger it over much."

"The burn." Snape said. Harry nodded.

"I think the fire element is more jealous than angry. At least, I hope so. I may find myself getting burned more often until I calm the magic."

"Could this potentially hurt another student?" the man asked.

"If the magic wished it, I suppose it could do anything. I don't know for certain," And Harry thought that the magic had probably been how he had arrived in this world in the first place. "I do not believe the magic holds much interest in those that do not find interest in it however. So... I'd be the most likely target, but truly, the water and earth are quite content at the moment, and the air rarely pays mind to me. I think fire is disappointed that I don't use it. It's just that it can be so fickle, and it's much stronger in its... emotion sometimes."

"It is really odd to be speaking of magic as though it is another living being." Snape leaned back in his chair, gazing at Harry. "You have gained quite a lot of power then... why don't other wizards and witches become... mages?"

"The costs are high, and very few wizards have enough power to begin with. Quite a bit of my magic was given, and most people find it difficult to part with. And then there is the task of actually getting the elements to pay attention..." Harry smiled at a secret memory. "That's really all I can tell you."

"You are not Harry Potter." Snape said seriously, and Harry felt his heart drop in his stomach.

"Yes I am, sir."

"I mean, that I do not know you. You have changed beyond my recognition."

"I see." Harry stood warily, hoping Snape would dismiss him soon.

"Does... using the elemental magic have a connection with how you know so many things about... my position, for example?" And Harry thought for a moment, and decided that yes, in a way it did, not that Snape needed the details. He nodded affirmative.

"May I go, professor? I have a study session with some of the other Hufflepuffs at nine, and I would like to be able to get there on time." Snape waved him away and summoned a stack of second year essays onto his desk with a scowl on his face.

Chapter 8: Thoughts and Perspectives

Harry sat down in the Hufflepuff common room waiting for Wayne to grab his notes and textbooks from the dorm room. Justin and Hannah sat across from Harry, talking about some trivial matter that he quickly tuned out.

After everyone was gathered the Hufflepuff 4th years made their way to the library for some late night studying for the Herbology exam on Monday.

Fond memories of distracting Hermione and waiting until the night before with Ron filled his head bringing with it a sharp pang of nostalgia. He missed Gryffindor red and gold, missed the closeness and warmth. Hufflepuff had its own charm he supposed, but nothing could replace Gryffindor in his heart.

"Ok, so everyone understands the reason why you should pick nightshade on the new moon, right?" Susan glanced at Harry briefly before returning her eyes to her notes.

"Same reason you pick moon flowers on the half-moon." Harry sighed and flipped his herbology book open to the right page.

"Wait... wouldn't you want to pick a moon flower on the full moon?" Wayne asked.

"No, it's too potent for most potions." Harry shrugged. "Some potions do require a flower picked on the full moon, but those are usually very dangerous and highly toxic."

"Can you repeat that?" Ernie asked, taking out some parchment and smoothing it out. Harry relayed the information a second time and then the group moved on to the next question. Occasionally Harry would take notes, but he knew most of this material from his previous fourth year and it seemed rather redundant writing down things he already knew. If it was something he wasn't as familiar with he might jot something down, but for the most part, this year was going to be cake.

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Dumbledore massaged the bridge of his nose, looking over a rather uninteresting document from the ministry, wondering if the employees of the ministry created such lengthy and time consuming documents to plague others with frustration and boredom because they were amused by the suffering of others.

There was no doubt about the importance concerning the school's curfew policies, however forcing someone to read thirty pages on the subject was simply too cruel. The only amusing thing about it was the fact that the author had to continually come up with ingenious ways to rephrase the points being made several times without seeming to repeat information. But honestly, he had understood the gist of the notice in the first paragraph.

His thoughts wandered to other more interesting things

It struck him as odd that no one had come to him with concerns about noticing changes in the Potter boy. Either the boy was a superb actor, or the other children did not notice or care.

Dumbledore had spent little time actually speaking with Harry and wondered if perhaps he should make an inquiry. Was he fitting in alright? Did he have any concerns?

But there were so many things he needed to finish before the end of the month.

Harry did not seem to be struggling in his classes, nor did anyone seem particularly concerned with him except for Snape who had spoken to him briefly about the boy, claiming that he was possibly cheating at potions. But other than that, he hadn't heard a word from the overly suspicious professor.

There was very little research on time travel or dimensional travel and most of it was theory and had never been tested. It would appear that this Harry Potter would be stuck in this time until he reached the age of seventeen and could legally undergo testing if he so chose. The department of Mysteries would no doubt love to toy with a dimensional traveler; however they could not touch him until he was legally an adult.

What Dumbledore really wanted, he could not have. He wanted the boy out of this universe. So many things could go wrong. The boy

had the potential to destroy the order from the inside out, to usurp everything as easily as blowing dust from a table's surface. His world was a few years ahead in its timeline and the worlds seem similar enough to where allowing this young man to hold such potentially damaging knowledge was maddening.

On one hand, Dumbledore craved to know what had happened in the boy's world, but he also knew that he should not know. Knowing the future of one world did not mean this world would follow the same path.

He could not send the boy back to his world nor did he believe that he would find a way in the foreseeable future. He could not otherwise dispose of the boy, but then again, did he really want the boy gone from under his watchful eyes? Dumbledore did not think it was safe to reveal Harry's origins to anyone else for fear of their temptation to demand knowledge they were not supposed to know, not to mention the boy's safety would be put at risk as more people learned about his situation.

What was an old man to do?

When did things become so complicated?

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Snape pondered over the Potter boy, wondering what he should and should not tell the Headmaster, and whether or not the boy needed to be brought to the attention of his other master. Did Dumbledore need to know about Harry?

Yes. Of course, but how much did he need to know? That his position was known? That the boy knew about the Order of the Phoenix? That the boy held personal information about the Dark Lord?

All of these things were relevant and necessary, but what about the fact that the boy was a mage?

What exactly was a mage? But no, he had said that 'mage' was not the proper term. Something in Latin... Why was his Latin so rusty? He should know the word, ausculto.

Snape pulled out a thick tome from the shelf near his desk and flipped it open.

"Ausculto..." He muttered, running his potion-stained fingers over the vellum pages, flicking them back and forth roughly as he looked for the word, "to listen... a servant...?"

If there was one thing Snape hated, and there were many things he hated, but if there was one thing he truly and thoroughly despised, it was being ignorant.

Before going to the headmaster about this particular bit of information, Snape decided that he would research the subject himself so he did not appear woefully inept and simple. Shutting the dictionary, Snape continued his pondering.

Did the Dark Lord need to know about Harry?

Honestly, the less that monster knew the better. The Potter boy was not particularly remarkable, rather he was clumsy and did poorly in his school work. Or, at least, that was before this year. He had never spoken much to the boy save to yell at him for messing up his lab work, and the boy had rarely spoken to him save to stammer apologies and whine.

What had changed, this mage business, was something extraordinary, and the boy would have done well in Slytherin with his power and the way he hides it without hiding it. Snape had to hand it to the boy. He didn't stick out. He wasn't popular or particularly friendly, but he was very interesting if you could catch him in an odd moment.

But Harry Potter wasn't a big player. He was a fourteen-year-old boy with a poor academic record, despite recent improvements. The Dark Lord would be uninterested.

No, only Dumbledore needed to be informed.

Snape had no choice but to trust Harry at his word that the information he knew would not leak out.

He was not in the habit of trusting adolescents with anything remotely valuable, or damaging, but he had very few options and

none of them were legal. It was rather unfortunate that the seemingly dull witted boy was sharper than he looked.

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Luna wandered down the corridor, looking for her left slipper. Something or someone had taken it, and she couldn't very well leave her right slipper alone to fend for itself. But where could it have gone?

She paused in the hall, noticing the large clock near the end of the hall. It chimed several times. Ten times, in fact.

Filch and Mrs. Norris would be out and about soon, but she really wanted to find her slipper.

"Hey Luna." She spun around on the spot and smiled when she saw Harry standing there with several other Hufflepuffs. A few of them whispered with eyebrows raised, but Harry stepped away from them and walked over. "Is something wrong?"

"Huh? No, just left. You see it's lost, and I can't find it." She smiled. Harry tilted his head in question.

"What's lost?" He asked with concern.

"My left slipper, silly."

"Harry, it's curfew," One of the Hufflepuffs warned unhelpfully in a whiney tone.

"Go on ahead. I'm going to see if I can help." Harry waved them away.

"Don't go losing us more points Harry."

"We won't get caught." Harry grinned sending them on their way. Luna pulled her wand from behind her ear only to tuck her hair back more securely before replacing it.

"Well, where do you look for things that need finding?" Luna asked.

"Hm... usually I don't look for them if I knew who they were taken by."

"What?"

"Some one took your slippers right?"

"Oh... well, if the snorkacks didn't move them then I suppose someone else must have taken them. Slippers don't move on their own, you know."

"Hm... well, because I don't know how to talk to snorkacks, let's go up to the Ravenclaw dorm and see if anyone can tell me if they know where your slippers are."

"Okay." Luna agreed. She noticed he was still wearing the necklace she gave him and felt a swell of delight run through her.

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Harry and Luna walked calmly into the Ravenclaw common room. Several students were milling about, studying or playing quiet games in secluded corners. It seemed incredibly boring. So unlike the loud Gryfindor common room where there were at least four games of exploding snap going and before the twins left, there was the occasional firework here and there.

Clearing his throat, Harry waved away his thoughts and claimed the attention of the room.

"Has anyone seen Luna's left slipper?" He called casually.

"Did you ask the snorgacks?" One of the Ravenclaw girls giggled with a small group of friends. Harry thought that given the fact that they spoke first, they were either the culprits or could tell him who was.

"I believe you meant Snorkacks." Harry drawled, eyes narrowing. "Care to share where you think a snorkack would put a slipper?"

"Get out of here, Hufflepuff." Someone said from his left.

Harry grinned but did not react otherwise, continuing to stare at the Ravenclaw third year. She was obviously involved.

"You don't actually have to tell me. I am simply giving you the chance to apologize for your pettiness."

"I know who you are... You're Harry Potter," She stood up and looked Harry in the eyes mockingly. That had been her mistake, really. "You're practically a celebrity. You could make it into the muggle book of world records as the world's most clumsy fool. I looked up the calming draught and I don't see how you managed to destroy the class room. I mean, you'd have to be pretty stupid to-,"

"Hide a slipper in the astronomy tower." Harry grinned, interrupting her little tirade. "I could think of a hundred better places to hide a slipper. Then again, I suppose you already have better places to hide things. But you save those places for things of value. Who would have thought you were such a kleptomaniac. Your poor roommates can't seem to find so many things lately. That solid gold pendant in your trunk is a family heirloom, but really, I have no idea the point in taking something so valuable that you couldn't sell or even wear."

The girl's eyes widened in shock and her friends stiffened.

"Did you take my pendant?" the girl sitting across from her whispered sharply.

"Come on Luna, let's go find your left slipper." Harry tugged Luna out of the common room. He felt a bit awful after using legilimency on an unsuspecting, though admittedly guilty, third year student. But only a bit.

He wasn't particularly skilled in legilimency, but this girl proved to be quite unaware that her thoughts were being invaded. She might have a small headache later, but she will no doubt be able to blame her roommate's shrieking for that.

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It was a small trick getting back to the Hufflepuff common room while trying to dodge Filch and his cat, but with so many years of practice, Harry didn't need an invisibility cloak or anything special to

get past those two. He knew plenty of secret passages to get around with.

Most of the Hufflepuffs had gone to bed, but a few remained talking quietly by the fire. Harry noted Cedric was among them and he felt a pang of guilt wash over him. Quietly, Harry slinked past the seventh years and ducked down the boy's dormitory hallway.

He was glad that he and Luna had found the somewhat elusive slipper. She had given him a bright smile, hugging her slipper as if she thought it might escape. It was strange being younger, seeing his friends look so innocent and unconcerned with the war. It was even stranger not talking to Ron or Hermione. It really sucked that everyone's opinion of him was so low and that his 'friends' now weren't really his friends.

He had noticed in the study groups the other Hufflepuffs tried their best to make sure he understood the class material, and they always emphasized that he had to work hard to keep up. It was really annoying to be treated like he was simple. Lately though, they had been asking him for answers and were beginning to acknowledge his "new found" intelligence.

"Hey Harry," Ernie said from his bed.

"Hey," Harry replied, shutting the door behind him.

"You didn't get caught did you?"

"I said I wouldn't, and I didn't." Harry rolled his eyes.

"Did you find Loony's slipper?"

Harry paused and looked at Ernie, noting the easy smile and his tired eyes. He was reading the potions text and taking notes on a scroll of parchment.

"Yeah. How's the potions coming along?" Harry easily changed the subject.

"Same old, same old. It's not like I do awful in potions, It's just, well, you know, Snape is such a git." Harry hummed noncommittally.

"He's not easy to understand, and neither are the books he chooses for readings."

"Yeah," Ernie yawned and set his parchment on his side table to dry. "But the book is really handy if you can't sleep. All it takes is a couple of paragraphs and if I'm not careful I wake up with drool on my pages." He laughed and Harry grinned halfheartedly.

"I've had that problem in History, but I don't think that's just me..."

"I guess Bins takes the cauldron when you're looking for a fast way to fall asleep."

"Speaking of sleep, it's been a really long day." Harry stretched and slipped out of his robe, kicking off his shoes and socks. Finally, he removed his jeans and slipped on a large white T-shirt before hopping into his bed. The sheets felt cold and he shivered waiting for his blankets to trap his body heat.

Harry sighed, listening to the sound of the other fourth year Hufflepuffs lightly snoring. Things would only stay peaceful for so long...

"Night Harry."

"Night Ernie."

Chapter 9: Politics

Today was the day, Harry knew, when the students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons would arrive. Dumbledore was moving about with an energetic gait, and the house elves were over working themselves trying to keep up with the cleaning.

Harry had been working very hard for the past few weeks trying to persuade the fire element to stop plaguing him, but rather than listen, it seemed to think of it all as a big joke. The fire acted as though it were shy (he wondered?) around other people, but as soon as he was alone in a corridor, torches along the wall would flare and sometimes escape from the wall's confines and twirl around him, grazing his skin. It never burned his clothes or his hair, but his skin was always fair game, and that's what it was, a game. But Harry wasn't really having fun. Having worked through six jars of burn-healing paste, Harry was tired of playing around.

It was even more annoying when his cauldron in potions would suddenly become over heated and ruin his assignment. Snape did not care to hear his excuses. He didn't know what to do. At least Snape had yet to throw him out of his classroom, though that might simply be because he knew certain things that could put Snape into a horrible situation.

Leaving the castle sounded like the best idea. Maybe sitting by the lake would calm him; at least the water wouldn't burn him.

Harry sat on a medium sized stone and held a smooth rock in his hands. It was a good skipping stone, but he did not skip rocks, he held them and felt their history and softly spoke to it, telling it about his life and his fears, and his hopes, and he spent quite a bit of time agonizing over his problems with the fire element.

"I don't know what it wants from me..." He said, running his thumb back and forth over the stone's smooth surface. "I've been trying to spend time using it and playing with it, but then when I want to stop, it flares up and burns me. I cannot give all of my attention to it all of the time. Then it ruins my potions, or scars my skin, and I don't know why it has suddenly taken such an interest with me." The wind brushed gently over him, and Harry leaned into it and sighed. The trees rushed together in sound and the water crawled a little bit farther up the shore.

"I am glad that you seem a little sympathetic..." Harry smiled a little, "that means a lot to me, because it has been hard adjusting to fourteen. This is my fault. I knew the consequences before giving my magic, but I didn't actually expect to survive past my face off with Voldemort. I fully expected to be taken by one or all of you.

"I did not choose this path in order to die, but I am well aware that eventually, it is likely that I will become boring or I'll make a mistake that you will not forgive. I am afraid... that you will leave me..." A breeze brushed his cheek lightly, moving in a pattern more like the brush of a hand than air, and the small stone resting in his palm grew warm. "I think I would rather die than live without you." And then arms circled around him from behind, teeth scraping his ear. Startled, Harry turned around defensively, calling his magic to shield him, but no one was there, and his magic did not obey, merely rising to the surface and swimming about him lazily. He heard laughter, as though from far away.

Mine

The word echoed through him, and he did not understand why his body shuddered and his hair was made to stand on end. He did not know why that word was thought, or if it even was a thought, his or another's.

Invisible hands lightly swept over his forehead and shoulders, grazing his lips and ribs and collarbone and... Harry fell off the rock, face flushed and eyes wide.

Mine

The word struck the same cord, but this time deeper, and the laughter returned ruffling Harry's hair in humor.

He swallowed, not sure what to make of that.

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The Great Hall was practically swarming with banners and decorations of welcome. Students chattered excitedly around their tables waiting to greet the guests that would arrive shortly.

Harry took a seat at the Hufflepuff table next to Susan Bones and Zachariah Smith. Wayne sat across from him, looking eager as the rest of them. The only ones who still remained composed were the Slytherins, and Harry of course.

Dumbledore stood, his movement drawing the eyes of the student body.

"I believe our guests have arrived," His blue eyes were bright and clear, commanding attention and respect. "May we all welcome Durmstrang's Headmaster, Igor Karkaroff and his students," The doors to the Great Hall burst open, as if on cue, and Harry smiled to himself, secretly amused by the old man's way with timing.

The Durmstrang students marched into the Great Hall just as Harry remembered, making a spectacle of themselves. He sneered as Karkaroff strode past, and debated whether or not to frighten the man so he might show his true cowardliness rather than that ridiculous façade of power and pride. Or maybe he would allow the man to fool himself into thinking his life was important for a while longer.

"And if you will also welcome Headmistress Madame Maxine and her students from Beauxbatons." There was another round of applause, perhaps louder than the first, as several girls in blue uniforms waltzed in, drawing the attention of more than half the males in the room. Harry, recognized Fleur, but did not feel affected by her veela thrall as he had the last time he was fourteen. Her eyes though, traveled to his, curious, if not wary. She nodded to him, and Harry raised an eyebrow, not understanding the gesture.

After the noise had died down and Dumbledore made his announcements along with Crouch Sr., presenting the Goblet of Fire and listing the rules of the tournament. Once all of that was safely out of the way, with a heavy reminder that no student under seventeen was permitted to cross the age line, they were finally allowed to eat. The house elves had really outdone themselves, and all around Harry, students were eating with gusto, chatting happily as they shoveled food down their throats.

Some of the girls from Beauxbatons took a seat at the Hufflepuff table following Fleur's lead. The half-veela sat down next to Harry, asking politely for Smith to give her some room. The normally reserved and snobbish boy had been reduced to mush, scooting

over so fast he was practically seated in Justin's lap. Fleur sat gracefully and a new plate was set for her.

"Hello, My name ees Fleur Delacour," She smiled prettily, "And you are?"

"Harry Potter," He shifted in his seat, unsure of why he was being singled out.

"Eet ees a pleasure to meet you," She brought her hand up to rest over his wrist and there was a sharp shock that ran through them both, startling many students as Fleur jumped.

"I'm sorry," Harry apologized, "are you all right?" He wanted to say more but his breathe suddenly left him. Fleur also seemed to be suffering the same problem, and held her hands to her throat in fright as Harry struggled with the magic.

'Please' he mouthed the words, 'I don't understand, but please don't hurt her. If you are mad at me, I will take punishment, but she is not important, so please let her go. She has nothing to do with us. Please.' Fleur sucked in breath with a harsh sound and Harry dare not feel very relieved as he made to leave. He gave her an apologetic glance before he rushed out of the hall.

Harry collapsed in an empty corridor, lips turning blue with the lack of oxygen. He wasn't sure what he had done to anger the magic so much, but what ever it was, he was paying the price. It was a shame, he thought, that he did not make it to a more secluded area of the castle before he died.

Then, to his surprise, air returned in a flood. It was cold and welcome to his laboring lungs. Tears or relief dripped to the floor from where he lay.

"I don't... understand," Harry coughed and gently ran his fingers over the stone floor, "What did I... was it because of Fleur?" Harry could feel a ripple of anger wash over him, like a desert sun, scorching his skin. "What did she do? What did I do? I don't understand at all." He could feel the magic pause indignantly and then stalk away, as though preparing to leave. Harry's arm reached out into the air as if to grab it back, and a soft cry escaped him. "No," He whispered, "Please, help me understand."

Mine

Mine to have

Mine to give

Only mine

The magic coiled like a snake around him, holding him tightly. Harry frowned but did not resist. His eyes closed in fear, relief, and then came the confusion... he did not know what he felt right now.

"You are talking about me?" Harry asked, unsure if this was what the magic had meant.

Yes

A feeling of pleasure burned within him, deeply dark and sweet, like smoldering ashes or something warm. The feeling was something Harry had never felt before, and it was completely unexpected. He covered his mouth in embarrassment, and shut his eyes tightly as if to shut out the feeling, but that was impossible. He had never thought the magic would come to regard him so personally, but he had no choice. If it wanted him dead, he would die. If it wanted him in pain, he would scream. But this? Another shock of bliss raced up his spine and he arched into it.

"Oh... ah... okay, I... I get it," His hands shook, breaths short and fast. The magic hummed in delight, almost purring when Harry gave in, "Alright, I think I understand... but... Fleur isn't... anything more than... another student." He panted, fingers scraping at the stone, head rolled back. "Don't get... angry over something so small."

The warmth spreading through him turned cold, and he shivered. Apparently Harry's encounter with Miss Delacour was not such a small issue after all. He hissed, but did not take back his words, because he truly did not believe he had done anything wrong.

As if commanding a great sigh the magic settled about him, annoyed but forgiving. Harry felt himself relax, but he tensed again when a smooth voice, like snake scales, slid through the corridor.

"Mr. Potter." Snape sounded irritated, then again, maybe a little amused as well. There was a loud silence and a lengthy pause in which Harry turned several shades of pink.

"Er.. yes sir?" Harry pulled himself into a standing position on shaky legs.

"Detention."

"Right."

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Snape was a bastard.

Taking one hundred points for nearly suffocating a student from another school; another fifteen for lying about the danger of elemental magic; ten for running from the Great Hall after the incident, never mind nearly dying in the process; and to top it off, another twenty points for a "lewd display" in a public hallway and in front of a professor.

That was one hundred and forty-five points docked from Hufflepuff.

It was ridiculous.

Harry's detention was scheduled for Saturday after dinner, which he already knew was going to be a problem. If the man was not angry now, he would be once Harry's name was pulled out of the Goblet of Fire. Snape was going to flay him alive and use his bones for potions ingredients.

First thing was first, however. Dinner was nearly over, and Snape was gripping his shoulder painfully hard as he led Harry back to the Great Hall.

"You will apologize for what ever terror you caused her,"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied resignedly.

"What exactly happened?"

"She touched me, and then the air left. I don't know why she was hurt, other than whatever she had intended towards me upset the magic enough to include her in my suffering."

"Are you suggesting that she was trying to hurt you?"

"What?" Harry looked up at the dark man in surprise, "Oh, no sir. Fleur-, I mean, Miss Delacour would never hurt anyone without cause. I know that she didn't mean any harm."

"But your magic decided otherwise. What is your... relationship with your magic?"

"R-relationship," Harry felt his face flush, reminded of the scene in the hallway, "Sir, I- I'm sorry that... I didn't have any control at that point, I swear-,"

"I merely asked for the relationship, Mr. Potter." Snape did not look at him, but by the tone of voice, Harry could tell that he was either amused or frightened by what happened. Harry hoped it was amusement. He couldn't stand people looking at him with fear in their eyes. But Snape was always very good at hiding what he was feeling if he chose to do so...

"Right," Harry's face burned, "My relationship... if only I knew. It's... never been so... i-intimate... I never knew it would regard me like..." He trailed off. What could Snape want out of this conversation? Was he just some old pervert?

"When you are more composed, perhaps during your detention, we can discuss this topic in greater detail."

"You think this is funny, don't you." Harry accused.

"I am not sure what I think about this. As a professor, I am concerned about what this might mean. We will need to discuss this, and I would suggest you speak with your head of house if that will make you more comfortable, but then again, I doubt professor Sprout would be able to assist you outside her love for magical plants." Snape pressed Harry forward into the Hall, and several heads turned to look at him. After years of such stares, one would think Harry would have grown use to the blatant gazes of curiosity

directed at him. But this was not so, and Harry had to swallow before speaking.

"I would like to apologize," He began, and the hall then fell quiet as the last eyes were drawn from whatever inane conversation from which their owners had been engaged in. Most of the students seemed unaware of what had happened, and looked at him with confusion. "Miss Delacour, I am deeply sorry for the harm I caused, for I intended none. I hope you will allow me a chance to explain?" The blond girl was no longer seated at the Hufflepuff table, and was instead standing next to an angry looking Headmistress. Madame Maxine looked about ready to rail Dumbledore through the enchanted ceiling. "Also, I apologize for the interruption and any undue distress by my actions." The grip on his arm loosened a bit so he delegated to move away from the potions master and confront the Headmistress and Fleur.

His magic pressed against his chest in warning, little sharp claws needling through his shirt so that it was almost painfully ticklish. 'Please, not in front of so many people,' He thought, 'If I promise not to touch her, can you please wait to punish me until later when no one will need to witness it?' The magic tugged a little at his hair in exasperation, as if Harry were being a nuisance. 'It will scare them, and I don't want them to be afraid.'

"Mr. Potter, is it?" Madame Maxine wasted no time, bending over him, trying to make him feel insignificant.

"Yes, Madame," Harry bowed his head and glanced at Fleur. "Are you alright? I am sorry I could not stay to make sure."

"Why did you leave, Mr. Potter?" Dumbledore spoke tiredly.

"I thought... I was about to die... I thought it would be best if the entire student body were spared such a scene."

"But you are not dead, so do please tell me why you attempted to murder my student."

"I did nothing like that." Harry said imploringly. "I would never hurt anyone like that. Please, can I explain to you what I think happened?"

"If you would be so kind," Dumbledore urged.

"Not... here, please." Harry glanced nervously around the hall.

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"I should be the one to apologize," Fleur looked like someone had murdered a kitten. Harry had explained what he was to the three of them as he had done Snape, giving them the bare minimum for facts.

"It's alright." Harry shook his head, "No one is at fault here."

"But I meant to... when I saw that my presence had no effect, I let my curiosity get the better of me. I had no right to try and force my thrall on you."

"Well, I'm glad no one was severely hurt," Dumbledore sighed, "I wish you had informed me that you were a mage Harry."

"I'm sorry sir." Harry bit his lip wondering how to reassure the man, but before he could say anything in his defense Dumbledore continued.

"It may not be the wisest choice for you to remain at Hogwarts."

"S-sir?" Harry balked. Was the Headmaster going to kick him out? "You are expelling me sir?"

"I think it might be for the best."

"Why?" shock was slowly being replaced by anger, "No one died, sir, and I apologized, and-,"

"I am afraid it is too dangerous for other students to be near you."

"What about Remus Lupin? You let him stay while he was growing up, and then you allowed him to teach, despite what he is."

"Professor Lupin was taking wolfsbane potion and was completely safe."

"What about when he was attending school where he almost turned another student? There was no potion then. And might I remind you

that you completely ignored the boy who had been terrorized by your precious Gryfindors, one of which ended up betraying-,"

"Harry, that was a controllable situation and I do not think it wise to-,"

"Then you let that fool Gildaroy Lockhart teach defense against the dark arts, for Merlin's sake! That man was a walking disaster waiting to happen. Not to mention, that if he had not been rendered terminally insane, he would have gone to Azakaban for all of the crimes he committed, that bloody fraud! Now you want to get rid of me?"

"Calm down, boy," Madame Maxine was gripping the wand at her hip, ready to pull it on Harry if need be.

"You are going to throw me out, so I can go to a bloody orphanage for three years only to be kicked out again with no place to go? Only to get a crappy part time job at a bloody club in Knockturn alley that pays near nothing so I can live with gutter trash-,"

"Language, Mr. Potter. And you have not been left with nothing. Your parents left you quite a bit of money, that you could live on for quite a while very comfortably."

"Oh. So that makes it okay?" Harry growled, "You are nothing like the Dumbledore I thought you were. Is it because I'm not a Gryfindor? Is that why I'm not important?" Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Fleur and Madame Maxine holding hands over their mouths in shocked disbelief.

"I do not appreciate being spoken to in such a manner." The Headmaster's voice became cold, but the fear and shame that had always accompanied that tone before had vanished. This was not his Dumbledore. This man had no love for Harry Potter.

"I understand sir." Harry reigned in his temper. If he could get the Headmaster to hold off expelling him until the announcement of the champions for the Triwizard Tournamant, he would be magically bound to perform the duties of a champion. The Headmaster could not interfere. Harry was determined to save Cedric, at the very least. Once that was done, he would gladly leave the grounds.

This time though, he would form his own resistance against Voldemort. Draco would not be safe, Harry decided. Dumbledore may offer protection, but he did not care for anyone but his Gryfindors. Harry could see that now.

"How long do I have then?" Harry ran a hand through his hair in agitation. What he needed to do was going to be huge.

"I would say it will take a day to file the paper work, and one more to make arrangements with the orphanage."

"If they don't decide to kick me to the curb too..." Harry muttered. But beneath the surface of churning anger lay restless anticipation and determination. He would need to find Draco. There was so much to do.

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Draco was sitting with his usual Slytherin crew, Pansy, Millicent, and the two bodyguards, Vincent and Greg. Something new, Harry noticed, was that Blaize Zabini was also sitting with them. To his knowledge, Blaize was a half-blood like him, and under normal circumstances, Draco would have probably shunned him. This was probably a good sign. Harry had not spoken to him for over a month. He should have at least asked him how things were progressing, but Harry had never considered taking on his own political agenda before. There was always someone else doing the work for him. Now, he would have to start paying more attention and making allies.

As Harry approached the group, they all seemed to look up at him simultaneously with a suspicious tension. Draco looked more wary than any of them. Had something gone wrong?

"Malfoy," Harry stepped in front of the group.

"Potter," the blond said coolly, gray eyes watching like a hawk.

"I have a better offer," Harry gave a small smile, hoping that somehow this would work to everyone's advantage. Pansy hissed something into Draco's ear, but she was looking at Harry as though he smelled unpleasant.

"I'm going to be expelled." Harry said simply, "Or at least that's Dumbledore's plan." Draco watched him patiently, waiting for the point. "I am offering you a third option. Have you made an appeal?"

"Careful Potter." Draco warned stiffly, glancing around to make sure they were out of earshot of anyone that might happen by. "But to answer your question, I have not."

"Good." Harry glared hard at Pansy who was about to open her over large mouth to say something. "I've decided that the headmaster does not have the best interests of the wizarding world in mind. His agenda is a personal one with Gryfindors pitted against Slytherins and this pathetic moral rivalry is being dragged into this war by his manipulations. I'm not even certain he realizes what he's doing. So, I'm going to offer a third option, one that does not involve enslavement to any master, but one of refuge and sanctuary."

"And what makes you think anyone will follow you?" Millicent asked skeptically.

"And why come to us?" Draco added, "Have you forgotten? We're Slytherins. We're backstabbers, remember?"

"I never forgot what house you belong to, Malfoy," Harry shifted his weight onto one foot and looked hard at the blond, "I know you, most of all, need a way out of this mess, and I think all of you are smart enough and practical enough to realize that there is no hope for achieving any personal goals so long as you are a slave to the Dark Lord. I know there is more potential in you than that. I also know that Dumbledore does not care about what happens to the other houses outside of Gryfindor. I'm sick of all of this Slytherin versus Gryfindor crap. This war is bigger than Hogwarts, but no one seems to be able to grasp that concept."

"It doesn't matter," Blaize snorted snobbishly, "you're a Hufflepuff. Who is going to listen to you?"

"You don't know what you're talking about Zabini." Draco stood up so that he was eye level with Harry. "I've seen him do things... that most of the professors can't even hope to achieve in their life times."

"I am offering protection, should you choose to take it."

"What's the catch?" Blaize also stood with an air of skepticism, but beneath the mask, Harry could tell by his eyes that he was interested.

"I'd like information. I intend to establish a network of sorts inside the school, and who better than students to assist? But it's voluntary of course. You don't have to if you don't want to." Harry would never force them to help, but he knew that he should offer a form of repayment so that they would not feel indebted to him if they chose to take his offer.

"We can do that, but how do we keep you from getting expelled in the mean time?" Pansy asked. Her sour demeanor had completely disappeared, leaving behind a young politician.

"It will be taken care of." Harry watched them carefully, "I'm a little concerned by the quick and unanimous agreement." It never hurt to be cautious.

"We've had seven weeks to think about this, Potter. We were planning on setting up something like this, but none of us has enough power or money accessible to accomplish what needs to be accomplished. You, on the other hand, have quite a sum of money stored away at Gringotts." Malfoy smirked, "You are the answer to our problems."

"Money won't be an issue for the time being." Harry frowned, "And, I'm still living on an allowance from the bank. I won't have full monetary access until I'm of age."

"Yes, but it will be an issue later when we establish headquarters and fund projects. Money is a useful tool... in so many ways. And the Potters were a very wealthy pureblood family. There ought to be loads of galleons wasting away in your family vault"

"You would say that Malfoy." Harry rolled his eyes.

"So, care to enlighten us on your plan to stay un-expelled?" Millicent picked at her nails for a moment and then focused her attention on Harry. He did not know Millicent well, mostly because she acted the wallflower. He knew, though, that she would make a very efficient spy. She had sharp eyes, and a quiet presence.

"I intend to become a Hogwarts champion." He said. There was a long pause where the Slytherins gauged whether or not he was serious.

"No. Really," Pansy smacked Greg's hand when he reached into his pocket for a biscuit. The round food tumbled out of his hand toward the ground. Harry would have let it fall, but the look of pure, unadulterated sorrow melting into his expression caused him to take pity. His magic caught the biscuit before it hit the ground and levitated it up to where Greg could grab it.

"That is the plan, seriously. Dumbledore can't do anything if there is a magically binding contract." The Slytherins nodded, watching the floating snack cautiously. "There's no need to worry. I'm almost certain I can find a way around the age ring, and I doubt I'll be the only fourteen year old competing."

"What do you mean?"

"Neville Longbottom is going to compete as well."

"Well that figures," Draco snarled, obviously miffed that Neville was going to be thrust into the spotlight yet again.

"It won't be his choice," Harry snapped, "There's an age ring for a reason. He is going to be set up. This tournament will be dangerous, and if we aren't careful, someone might die."

"What do you mean, set up?"

"I mean that by the end of this year, Voldemort's coming back, and this tournament is a cover, a distraction, and a tool in order to resurrect him. He needs Neville's blood, and is going to kidnap him. But what he doesn't realize is that by taking his blood, he becomes easy to track. It will be his undoing."

"He will kill Longbottom." Vincent spoke up, and all eyes were on him, making him blush under the attention, "What I mean is, don't we need him to defeat you-know-who?"

"Well, ultimately, it is his job to rid the world of the Dark Lord, but the two of them are bound by prophesy. One must kill the other. Prophesy is ancient magic, and there is no way anyone can interfere

until one of them kills the other. Neville won't die in this confrontation. Their wands are brothers, and this will give Neville the opportunity to escape. I don't know exactly how he will choose to defeat Voldemort but-,"

"Stop using his name!" Draco snapped.

"It's rather silly to fear a name," Harry shrugged nonchalantly, but inside he was pained. It was his Dumbledore that had said that to him. The old wizard had given him courage that few possessed during that time. "I know what he is." He continued, "I know how powerful he is. But I also know that he can be killed."

"Where are you getting all of your information?" Draco stepped closer, eyes bright with curiosity. "How do you know all of these things? What happened to you over the summer?"

"Yeah, if you already know so much, what use do you have for a network inside the school?" Pansy added.

"I... that's... I'm not sure if I can share that yet. I do need help. I want to know what's happening with the other students. I want to be able to know as much as I can about who is on what side, and see if we can't steer them our way if we can. I want to know who is struggling between choosing sides, and offer them a way out."

"Okay. We can do that."

"Great."

"Are there any students we want to look out for specifically? What about professors?"

"I would say start with Ravenclaw and Slytherin. They will be having the toughest time. I can work on the Hufflepuff side of things. Professors are all pretty much involved with the Order of the Phoenix. Oh right. And I forgot to mention. Moody, isn't actually Moody. He's a Death Eater under polyjuice potion."

"What?" Blaize exclaimed. "And you didn't think to tell us that earlier?"

"You can't blow his cover yet." Harry hissed, "He is essential to the plan. I gave you that information so you could be on your guard. He knows legilimency. How many of you know occlumency?" Draco, Millicent, Pansy and surprisingly Vincent raised their hands.

"I'm not very good at it yet, but I know when someone is trying to take a look inside my head." Pansy said.

"Just make sure not to look him in the eyes if you can avoid it. He's not as subtle as Snape, but if your guard is down, he will find a way in." Harry folded his arms in thought, trying to think if there was anything else he was missing. "At any rate, we need to come up with a meeting place and a time that fits our schedule. I know plenty of places where we can go..."

"You really are something, Potter." Draco did that 'lean in close' thing he did, and Harry thought to himself that it really was a brilliant intimidation tactic, because it certainly set him off balance.

"I want to change things." Harry said quietly and stepped back, "I don't want anyone else to get hurt, or murdered. And I am becoming increasingly sick of how being in a Hogwarts house defines you as good or evil or unimportant."

"Well said, Hufflepuff." Millicent winked, "We will meet on Sundays,"

"After Quidditch practice," Draco added.

"Is nine alright?" Harry asked. No one objected, so he continued, "Alright, nine in the evening on Sundays, and we can meet..." Harry thought to use the room of requirement, but Dumbledore knew about that, and if the Umbridge toad could get in, then the headmaster certainly could. Then he thought about the Chamber and grinned almost evilly. The headmaster may know about it a bit and perhaps even the general location, but there was no way he could actually enter. The trick was going to be finding a way back out again.

While he debated this in his mind, the Slytherins squabbled among themselves, arguing with each other about the best place to meet.

"No way. Everyone knows about that room behind the tapestry." Pansy argued with Vincent.

"And besides it will be cramped and dirty." Draco added.

"Then what about the library?" Blaize shrugged.

"Anyone could over hear us in there, you dolt." Millicent rolled her eyes, "This is not like some club meeting. This is a war. The meeting place has to be secret."

"We will meet in the Chamber of Secrets," Harry interjected, smile broadening when silence fell."

"What?" they all looked at him as though they wanted to laugh, but were unsure if that would be appropriate.

"You are mad," Draco sneered.

"I know where it is, and I know how to get in." Harry smiled like the Cheshire cat, "The problem will be getting out. We may consider taking brooms until we find a better way. The point is... not even Dumbledore can get in."

"Well, that's convenient." Greg decided out loud. Harry watched their faces turn from doubt and skepticism to awe and something close to excitement.

"Meet me in the second floor corridor on Sunday then. You can bring others along if you'd like. But leave out those who have already declared their side. Oh, and bring your brooms, inconspicuously please."

"Mad Potter, and his little gang of mad snakes." Draco shook his head, "I'm still not sure if I should trust you."

"I know I can stand against Dumbledore in strength, if that helps to reassure you."

"Liar."

"And I can hold my own with the Dark Lord." Harry ignored them. "But you also have to understand that it isn't truly my magic. I can only ask for power, and I may never truly keep it. I am not a wizard any longer."

"Then you are a mage." It was not a question, and Harry could see by the look on Draco's face that he did not approve. "Mad, mad, mad. What the hell is wrong with you? What if you up and die in the middle of a battle? What if-,"

"If, Malfoy, if. And I am pretty sure... that I'm not about to die." Harry thought of earlier happenings in that blasted corridor, and his face flushed, "Anyway," And he hated his voice for cracking, "That is not something you need to worry about."

"And I thought I had it bad, but you aren't even human anymore." The accusation was harsh, and Harry paused at Draco's words. Being dehumanized and torn into about something he had no control over, being snubbed for giving him self to the elements... Offended did not even begin to cover how he felt.

"It was my choice. I'm not asking you to do the same." Harry was clearly hurt, but he brushed the feeling aside as best he could, "I will see you Sunday." He said curtly and quietly dismissed himself.

If only Ravenclaw students were half as motivated to seek shelter from the Light and Dark Lords, he wouldn't have to work with pureblooded snobs. But then again, there was a fair share of them clustered in the raven's house, and the fact that Slytherins were blunt about these things did not mean the purebloods from other houses would not think along similar lines. Slytherins were simply unafraid to voice their opinions when it came to flaunting their social standing.

And Harry cursed him self again, for thinking in terms of houses. He would have to stop being a hypocrite, and fast.

Sunday. He could wait until Sunday.

First though, he needed to sneak his name into the Goblet.

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When Draco went to bed that night, he found that he could not sleep. Every position he tried was uncomfortable, and his thoughts wouldn't quiet. Potter was constantly on his mind, and he didn't understand why the other boy was so... There. Present and there.

For a while it had bothered him, why he was different, why his eyes had changed, and why Potter pulled at his thoughts, but now he might have understood.

Potter was a mage, a servant and a conduit to magic, a conscious magic that should never be so free to meddle with human affairs. Something massively powerful was prowling within a fourteen year old Hufflepuff, setting an unpredictable course to create or to destroy at will.

The thought was frightening.

Potter was hardly a person anymore. He was a thing. An object.

It was disgusting, yet the power was tempting, and why couldn't he stop his mind from thinking about the other boy?

Not human. Those words were like a slap to the face. Potter was something that he had only read about. Mages were something that were evil and against human nature. Against humanity. Potter was not human.

But then, neither was he. Draco was a creature. Was that better or worse than a mage?

Chapter 10: The Goblet of Fire

It was very early in the morning. It was so ungodly early, that not even Peeves and Mrs. Norris could be seen skulking about. Harry waited patiently in a dark corner of the Great Hall hiding behind the large tapestry of the Hogwarts crest displayed upon the wall directly behind the staff table. He waited in silence for the fake Moody to drop Neville's name into the Goblet of Fire and then leave.

Tonight had been somewhat of a stake out. He wanted to see who was placing their names into the overlarge cup, as well as keep an eye out for the nefarious Barty Crouch Jr. With a very strong disillusionment charm and quite a few notice-me-not charms, Harry observed the seventeen year old students from all three schools nervously adding their names. He also had a good laugh at the Weasley twin's attempt at passing over the age line, and made a mental note to invest in their joke shop when he got the chance.

Harry knew that no charms would fool Moody's magical eye, so when the night was growing later and fewer students made an appearance, he asked, as sweetly as he could, if his magic would be oh so kind as to shield him from sight, even from that dreaded magic eye. And, after much squirming and gasp stifling, the magic obliged.

By now the Great Hall was empty and dark. The only light came from the stars dotting the enchanted ceiling, and the cool glow of magic surrounding the Goblet. Cool, blue flames licked welcomingly along the wooden edges, casting strange shadows upon the walls.

Harry made his way over to the Goblet, stopping before the age ring. It turned a bright red color as he approached, shrinking a little, but it did not dissipate. He made to step over the line cautiously, and winced when hot flames rose around his ankle.

"I am of age." Harry said calmly, waiting for a response. His ankle throbbed with pain. The magic flared a bit, swirling like smoke and ash. "I would like to pass." Once again Harry made to take a step forward, but fire held him back.

"I wish... you wouldn't hurt me. I am running out of burn-healing paste, and I can not always grit my teeth through the pain you cause. I know I have no say in the way you treat me. But I still think for my self, and I dislike it when you hurt me. And I know you must be tired

of me asking, but will you please stop burning me? Snape will get angry if I have to keep barrowing from him."

"Why still so insolent?" came a whisper, and the age ring spun together, weaving a figure of light, the color of hot coals. This time the voice did not come from within, but from the light shifting into a shape somewhat resembling a human, maybe.

"I-insolent?" Harry stepped back from the uncomfortable heat in surprise. The elements had never, not even once, spoken allowed, nor had they ever taken human form. Harry did not have to guess which element stood before him, as a mirror image of him self, glowing like dying embers. Fire spoke:

"You are so certain, acting as though we will always bow to you and your commands. Do you know no humility?"

"I am... sorry you think that of me. I am sorry if that is what I-," Harry looked away from Fire, turning his face away to the cool dark. He did not know what to say in order to be forgiven, other than the standard 'I'm sorry.' But Harry had been trying so hard to understand the fire element for the last month, and he still did not know whether it was angry with him or jealous or if it was simply playing around. "I don't mean to be insolent." He said quietly.

"The others are... quite fond of you, and I see you pull and twist them into submission, but you will not have me so easily."

"I am in need of you, and all of you, and I try to be mindful of asking rather than commanding, and I may expect more than you are willing to give, but I know not to complain. I trust the magic's judgments. I am afraid, that I do not understand what you want from me. You hurt me, but I do not know what I've done wrong. Tell me what I must do so that you might approve of me. I can not take this endlessly."

"You speak to your wizard kind so confidently, that you may bypass magic law because you are ours. What will you do should we disallow your admittance?" Harry's face fell, heart throbbing in tandem with his burn, loud and painful against his ribs. What would he do? Dumbledore would expel him, and then Cedric would still die, and...

And Harry blinked the beginning of tears away in frustration and shook his head to clear his thoughts.

"I realize... that this is purely selfish of me." Harry tried to make his voice steady, but it came out a bit more ragged than he had intended. "I know that saving Cedric from this is... is really just so I can repay his memory. I-if I am truly not meant to change fate..." Harry swallowed, and looked briefly upon the heat reflection of himself before looking away again. "I have to try. I have always been like this, and I can't just let him die. I can't just let all of those people suffer again if I can change it. Please let me change it. I can not bear to live through that again. Please."

"You are cowardly and insolent. I still cannot see what the others see."

"I am sorry that I am not... not good enough." Because, Harry never was. He was never good enough. He always made stupid mistakes and always made a nuisance of himself. He had gone into the Mage's Path all but completely blind, knowing that his only hope for destroying Voldemort lay with gifted power, because despite what Dumbledore said, Harry could not believe that love would destroy something so purely evil and so purely strong. After losing Sirius, Harry found he could no longer stand to lose anyone else, and yet he did, and it had driven him near mad trying to discover a way to overcome his enemy. He did not care about consequences. He gave himself over to magic with the expectation that the final encounter would kill him. He had not intended any of what happened afterwards. "I'm sorry," he said again, "But other people are counting on me. Will you please let me pass?"

Fire stood before him in silence for a moment, and then moved, unlike any true living thing, not walking but still it moved closer in a manner that only light might obtain. Harry flinched away when Fire's human shaped fingers lightly brushed the skin beneath his eye. In minor irritation, the same hand gripped Harry's hair and forcibly turned his head back to face the figure, and surprisingly, though Fire's body was near unbearably hot, that which came into contact with Harry's skin was not scalding.

"Do not forget you belong to me, coward." Fire's voice became low, but it was still a near whisper.

"I trust that you will remind me should ever you think I forget." Harry closed his eyes to the light and heat, breathing the thick air. His body was shaking and sweaty.

"I will let you by, because you speak well. I find that I can not decide if I should be angered or amused by you. You woke us, you foolishly interested us, and you are still so naïve to what you have become. Prove to me you are worth keeping, and I will perhaps listen to your requests more often. Pathetic child," And with that, the heat vanished and the age line parted around Harry, allowing him to step up to the Goblet of Fire and place his name within.

"Thank you," Harry ran his fingers over the wooden ridge of the cup. "I'm sorry, I am. I'll try to be a better Mage. I'll try harder to be good."

Harry offered one last look at the cup before leaving the Great Hall. Quietly, he returned to his dormitory and slipped into his bed without waking his dorm mates. His heart ached and his throat felt tight, and he thought he almost wouldn't mind if he fell asleep and never woke up. At least then it would be over. At least then he didn't have to keep struggling day after day, trying to fix everything that went wrong the first time around. But Harry was stronger than that. He would get up tomorrow, but for now, hopefully he could attempt to catch a few hours of sleep before Friday morning classes.

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"Harry," Wayne's voice paraded through Harry's dreams, pulling him back into consciousness. He had slept through breakfast, getting up only to go to classes before going back to sleep. He had forgotten how a fourteen-year-old body needed ten or more hours of sleep a night, and so breakfast and lunch had passed without his notice.

As Harry continued to ignore the boy and hide his head under the sheets, Wayne became frustrated. Without more warning than a "get up, Harry," the covers were torn from his body and a rush of cold air passed over his bare legs. He yelped and sat up glaring at the offending roommate.

"What's the deal?" Harry scowled, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "Classes are over for the day,"

"But the Champions are going to be announced."

"So?" Harry itched to summon the blankets back onto his bed, but knew that he should go watch the announcement anyway. He needed to be there so he could see the look on Dumbledore's face when he discovered Harry's scheme to remain at Hogwarts.

"Don't you want to see who gets chosen? I hope its Cedric."

"He would make a brilliant Hogwarts Champion," Harry conceded, sliding off the bed quietly.

"Hey, what happened to your ankle?" Wayne threw the covers back onto the bed. Harry glanced down at his feet, and sure enough, blistered and red skin coiled around his ankle.

"Oh. I forgot to put something on it. I am getting a lot of burns lately..." he sighed and rummaged through his trunk for the last of the burn-healing paste. There was not enough to cover the entire area, but it helped.

"Now that you mention it, you have been getting burns a lot. And here I thought all of your clumsiness disappeared. You should be more careful." If Wayne thought Harry wanted a lecture, the idiot could guess again. Harry gave a non committal grunt and started dressing him self.

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"And this year's Hogwarts Champion is...." Dumbledore unfolded the piece of paper carefully, "H-," He paused, swaying as if off balance, "Harry Potter."

The hall became very quiet, but no table was quieter than Hufflepuff. Wayne elbowed him in the ribs, and of course Harry already knew his name would be called, but he dare not stand, for even as Dumbledore would realize his act of rebellion, this did not mean the rest of the school needed to know. Dumbledore needed to appear as if he did not understand why his name was called, because of the risks of letting other persons know about the fact that Harry was not from this particular word or time, and also, perhaps, because it was always best to appear as if he could handle any situation calmly and efficiently.

He had to appear the great leader, in a Machiavellian sort of way, for politics was less concerned with reality than with the outward appearance of morality and strength. For a moment, Harry wondered if he had been fooled by his world's Dumbledore, but he reminded himself that his Dumbledore had died and also that there was no point in agonizing over something he could not change. If he ever found a way back to his own world, he would at least be able to see things with an open mind, and prevent, if possible, the continued Hogwarts house stereotypes.

"This... He's fourteen! How on earth did-," But Karkaroff was interrupted abruptly when another paper shot from the cup, its edges scorched on the corners. Harry knew already whose name would be found written on the small scrap. The hall became even more silent, if that were possible, the students and staff waiting with baited breath to hear the name.

"Neville Longbottom." Dumbledore read, a little more strongly, but he still looked as if he would collapse. The silence fled the hall then, and suddenly voices filled the space, loudly and opinionated. The words 'outrage,' and 'both fourteen,' and 'that idiot?' were heard repetitively.

Harry watched Dumbledore carefully, and noticed his brow furrowing in thought. And then, as if finally realizing what all of this meant, the old man turned to look directly at him in shock. Harry could only offer him a grim look of determination. Dumbledore did not look away as he raised his wand to his throat, casting a sonorus.

"SILENCE," The command boomed across the hall, effectively quieting the mass of people. With the hall quiet, he pulled the wand from his throat and spoke in a tired voice, "Would all of the champions come with me please."

Harry finally made to stand, watching as Neville looked to his friends for guidance. Eventually the boy-who-lived stood and walked with him after Dumbledore and the other champions.

Once they all gathered into Dumbledore's office, the headmaster motioned them to be seated. Just as they sat down, Igor and Madame Maxine rushed into the office, complaints on their lips.

"Albus, I do not understand-,"

"Dumbledore, this is absurd! Fourteen-year-olds cannot-,"

"Sir, and Madame, I am afraid, there is nothing to be done."
Dumbledore took a seat behind his desk, "These four are bound to participate by magical contract. Their names were selected."

"It is dangerous!"

"Preposterous!"

"Mr. Longbottom, did you put your name into the Goblet?"
Dumbledore asked, already knowing the answer.

"No sir,"

"He's lying!" Karkaroff accused.

"I'm not! Why would-,"

"Please, ladies, gentlemen." Dumbledore allowed some of his magic to flow into his words that only Harry and Fleur seemed to notice. The effect was a calming one, and Harry did not see any point in disrupting it. Fleur wrinkled her nose but said nothing. Harry suspected she, because of her heritage, was more sensitive to emotional and empathetic magics than most other witches and wizards. "Mr. Potter, did you put your name into the Goblet?" His blue eyes were frosty and cold and Harry frowned, wondering why he was so angry. Did he think he put Neville's name in?

"What do you think, Sir?" Harry raised an eyebrow, "There is an age line. Fourth years can't cross it," Harry remained expressionless, determined not to give anything away to the others. A light probe of legilimency gently pushed at his shields, asking for entrance instead of demanding, however instead of allowing the man into his thoughts, he projected them instead, 'I did put my name in the Goblet, and I know who put Neville's name in as well. I do not think I should tell you who it is, and I have no cause to help you any longer after your attempt to expel me. You may consider this act my civil disobedience. I am bound by magic, and I will remain at Hogwarts for the rest of this year, or until the tournament is over. After that, you may expel me, and I will leave without quarrel. I am not you

enemy, and no longer am I your friend.' The man looked away, rubbing the bridge of his nose as though he had a head ache.

"I see. At this point in time, it would appear that there are four champions."

"I do not see what is fair about this!" Madame Maxine huffed indignantly.

"Well, they are only fourteen." Dumbledore soothed, and it seemed to work, because then there was very little argument, except over Neville, who had been flushing deep red the entire time. The headmasters of the foreign schools demanded to see his grades and asked about his activities, getting a good idea what they were up against, they however, did not bother with Harry's grades.

After a debriefing of the tournament rules and regulations, and other helpful information, Dumbledore allowed the students to be absconded by Rita Skeeter into an empty classroom while he negotiated with Karkaroff and Madame Maxine.

The woman was on them like a fly on carrion. However, before she got to Neville with her questions, Harry leaned over and whispered a warning in Neville's ear.

"Beware. She'll twist whatever you say. Try not to say anything that might be held against you."

"Mr. Longbottom," The woman gushed, her quill already scribbling acid green ink over parchment. Harry discretely disabled the ink flow of the quill, but knew that act alone would not be enough to stop her, "How does it feel to be a Hogwarts Champion?"

"Er..." Neville looked back at Harry nervously.

"No, no dear, look here. Now, are you excited about competing? What is it like to be the youngest-,"

"We are both fourteen, ma'am." Harry interrupted, forcing his expression into something depicting deep regret, "I am so sorry, but you will have to interview someone else for now, Neville and I have to meet someone. Maybe he will set up an interview with you

another time. This whole thing came as quite a shock to both of us, so I hope you understand."

"But-,"

"Thank you. I'm so glad." Harry forcibly grabbed Neville and shoved him out of the room, giving one last look towards the reporter. The look he gave her was one of malice that promised retribution if she crossed him. But Harry knew that it was probably going to be disregarded anyhow, and he would need to be on the lookout.

"Er... thank's Potter."

"Harry."

"Right, thanks Harry."

"Don't mention it. That woman would take whatever you say and make you sound like a fool. And be careful about what you say to others, because information has a way of... leaking."

"You're pretty paranoid, Harry," Neville smiled, "You don't have to worry about me so much. I've dealt with the press almost all my life. Though, I suppose nothing as controversial at this."

"Yes, well. It would appear that you've never been interviewed by Skeeter before," Harry shrugged, "She's not a witch to cross, and when at all possible, avoid her."

"Got it," Neville scratched the back of his head, "So... are you really meeting someone?"

"Well... no." Harry said. "I don't have any plans except homework... and avoiding everyone else. I'm pretty sure no one is going to be happy about all this."

"Want to sneak into the kitchens and grab something to eat?"

"Seriously?" Harry grinned, "Is that the best hiding place you can come up with?"

"Oh, well, I suppose I could share a few secret passages with you, as long as you promise not to tell any one else about them."

"Sure. That might be fun." Harry grinned and let Neville lead the way.

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Harry had avoided the school population and hid with Neville, Ron and Hermione, doing homework and playing exploding snap, or just talking about silly things. They found an out of the way classroom on the sixth floor and Harry helped Hermione ward the doors from unwanted people. Ron disappeared after an hour or so to grab food and escape the lengthy study session, but when he returned he had brought with him a sullen and withdrawn attitude. Harry knew what was going to happen, and also knew nothing he could say would be able to change it. Ron finally blew up at Neville for being a champion and always hogging all the glory and for supposedly lying to him about putting his name in to the goblet. In the end, he stormed loudly out of the room, probably to seek out sympathizers. Neville looked pained and resigned as Hermione went after Ron in an attempt to calm him down.

"He will come around. When he sees what we have to face, he won't envy you any longer." Harry said reassuringly

"You're probably right." Neville swallowed, "I guess I should be getting back to the common room."

XXXXX

Harry spent most of his weekend trying to get his homework finished for Monday and lurking in out-of-the-way parts of the castle. He had missed quite a few meals avoiding a few older students from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw. There was a good chance that they were not looking for him just to talk. But Harry could only miss so many meals, and hiding away from the world was not going to help matters. No one from Hufflepuff had spoken to him, although, he only truly noticed their blatant dismissal of his existence when he went to dinner.

As he entered the Great Hall, he endured the sideways looks of hatred and loathing from the students, and discovered, to his dismay, that no one in Hufflepuff had saved him a seat. They sat in such a way that there was no room, even on the very ends of the table, and

when Harry tried to interrupt a conversation to ask for a spot, they merely spoke louder in attempt to ignore him.

Harry became frustrated, and felt the edges of anger stirring from within his soul, his fingernails digging into his palms. He wanted to hex Wayne most of all, for his betrayal, but then thought that, perhaps they all saw it as though he betrayed them. Even if that were the case, Harry would have liked it better if they had given him the chance to explain, but rather than give him the benefit of the doubt, they all just jumped to the conclusion that he broke the rules and put his name in the Goblet of Fire just to spite them.

Wayne, he thought, might have stood by him, but as it turned out, he was a fair-weather-friend, ignoring him like the others. He followed the herd, and Harry would remember that. He wanted to yell at his housemates for being ignorant morons, and say exactly what he thought of them. So much for Hufflepuff loyalty...

People were always like this, always turning and hiding and scurrying like bugs, like bees in a hive. Envy and wanting for glory but too lazy to achieve it. Their revolting, disgraceful mindlessness, following the popular consensus without question, without thought.

But...

Harry closed his eyes and exhaled loudly, giving into empathy. They were only kids. They knew nothing of his motives, and with the other Harry's reputation, there was no reason for them to not to be thoroughly miffed. They were ignorant, but that was not a crime. None of them knew yet, what sort of evil plotting was invested in this tournament, but come the end of the year, they would hopefully have to acknowledge the danger of this war, and that he was not playing games.

He gave a nod to the Hufflepuff table, not for any particular purpose except perhaps to mentally tally the people against him. Then he turned to leave.

"Potter," Pansy stepped in front of him, "I'm afraid we missed you at lunch." Harry eyed her warily. Her eyes gleamed with something verging on mirth, but also with caution and vigilance.

"I was hiding, if you must know," Harry offered a sigh and glanced up at her through dark lashes.

"Does it surprise you that everyone has turned on you?" She asked.

"No, I suppose not," Harry frowned, "It still hurts though. I never knew how heartless and judgmental my own housemates could be." His hands fisted and his body trembled in helpless anger, "But, I'll show them. I'll show them this tournament that is supposed to be about glory and school pride is just a sham. I'll show them that this is war, and they... and they will acknowledge me, and they will know that this is not a game."

"I think," Pansy said, "that you might have done well in Slytherin, but you wear your emotions so plainly, I can see why you were sorted into Hufflepuff." Harry grinned ruefully, thinking that, no he was not a Hufflepuff, but a foolhardy Gryffindor. Her eyes suddenly narrowed, as if saying, you know something you are not saying.

"The sorting hat said as much... I've got cunning in loads," He offered when her eyes sharpened.

"Why not join us for dinner?" She offered, still looking thoughtful. Harry ignored the look. He didn't know if it would be politically adventitious to take a seat at another table, but then he shrugged it off and followed her. It isn't as if their hatred matters at this point, he thought despairingly. They would come around or not, but there were obviously more important things to worry about than his idiot housemates.

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Snape followed him out of the hall and down to the dungeons, and all the while Harry was biting his lip nervously, knowing that this man was about to ask some super embarrassing questions and make him describe equally embarrassing things.

"Mr. Potter," Harry heaved a great sigh at the familiar sound of his professor's voice, thinking that he would rather be speaking to McGonagall about this sort of thing... but then again, maybe not. The potions professor took a seat behind his desk. Snape's office, small as it was, felt even smaller by the volume of books stacked in towers surrounding his desk and between strange creature-like

bookends on shelves bowing under their sheer weight; and Harry, never having been in Snape's actual office, was surprised by the chaotic clutter, of potion dissertations and untitled volumes – probably dark – and so many other subjects. The man was an utter genius, he knew, but he had always been so meticulous, and this scene sort of ruined the image.

"Sir?"

"Take a seat," Snape waved his wand and moved a stack of books that had been occupying a chair, presumably one for guests. Once Harry was seated, Snape leaned forward, peering at him in quiet examination, "I would like to know more about the incident in the corridor and why your magic was attempting to strangle another student." Harry heaved another great sigh.

"You would know what my being a mage means by now?" Harry asked. At the professor's hesitant nod, Harry continued, "Well, you see... Miss Delacour can sense how her thrall affects other people, and because I am not a wizard, and because I belong to magic, her thrall doesn't work on me the same way as it might on a wizard. She had no idea what I was, so I won't blame her, but..." Harry paused to rub a sore spot on the back of his neck where his magic was pinching him moodily, "She tried to focus her thrall on me because I was unaffected, and... because of her curiosity, my magic sort of rose to my defense, although, I suppose not really. It was angry at Fleur for trying enthrall me, but I think it was even angrier at me because I knew she was half Veela, and I think, it was angry because I let her sit next to me. Maybe... it was jealous?"

"But you do not know this for certain?"

"Well, no... the magic... doesn't usually communicate with words and so, I get confused because I don't know, and I end up getting hurt because I misunderstand."

"With words?"

"Well, some times it will communicate in my head like... well like in the corridor, but not very often, and if it does, it is very... simple speech. Maybe one or two words at a time, and it can be hard to understand. It has only spoken aloud to me once. And... it was..." He trailed off unable to find the words.

"And that... scene in the corridor?" Snape looked ridiculously fascinated, like Harry was some sort of new puzzle to figure out, or maybe a new sort of potion reaction waiting to be deciphered.

"Ah..." Harry flushed, "Another anomaly that I find myself wondering about. It doesn't really make sense, but I think that part of the magic is infatuated with me, and I don't know why. Sometimes, I think it is just fooling around with me, other times it's serious," Harry thought about Fire and shivered, remembering the powerful heat against his skin, "At first, the elements simply interacted with me, like I might interact with... well a professor. It was more of a professional arrangement; at least, that's what I thought. But after I survived the-, " Harry blinked, and mentally berated himself for his near slip, "After I survived the summer, which I had not expected to, I didn't know what to do. So long as I serve the elements, or rather, so long as I live, I thought I may as well learn about them. So I started talking with stones, or I sat out by the lake... just little things, because I had time... because I am not overly fond of reading if I don't have to... And, I guess... maybe that professional relationship has changed? I probably should have done some more reading."

"Perhaps," Snape said mildly, "There are very few books on mages, and those that exist are very old." Snape said, "I have not discovered much of the specifics, only that being a mage is widely frowned upon."

"Well, I don't see why." Harry shrugged, "Malfoy accused me of being less than human, and I don't think that was fair. It isn't like he is one hundred percent wizard either." He winced a little when Snape raised an eyebrow.

"And what have you and Mr. Malfoy been discussing?" Harry watched the man give him a suspicious look, knowing that he must be trying very hard to resist using legilimency.

"We... have been talking," Harry looked at the man out from under dark lashes. Snape's lips became a thin line, but he looked as though he would not press it.

"I may have to do some research in more unsavory libraries to find more information on mages and the elements." Snape had a thoughtful frown on his face, "I have one last question before I send

you to the potions classroom to disembowel toads. Why did you decide to become a mage, without even knowing what consequences you faced? What sort of foolish child are you?" His dark eyes had no trouble making Harry flinch his gaze away, partly in shame, but also partly reflex from occlumency lessons. After a few minutes of worrying his lip and playing with the hems of his sleeves, Harry finally answered.

"I was desperate." He shifted uncomfortably, "My options were limited and I had great need." It was not a lie, no, but Snape would ask for more, Harry knew.

"And what great need could you possibly have had?" the professor said smoothly.

"I can't answer that, sir." Harry bowed his head, watching the man warily from beneath his fringe of dark hair.

"Why not?"

"The same reason I would tell no one of the position you hold, or why I say nothing of the Order." Harry's eyebrows drew together, thinking of the headmaster. The man might decide to try coercing the information from him. In Dumbledore's mind, he was more or less a liability to the Order of the Phoenix. He would have to be careful at any rate. Harry did not believe the man would try to hurt him, but then again...

"The toads are in a crate next to the first table in the classroom. I would like you to separate the organs into the jars as labeled, is that clear enough instruction?"

"Yes sir,"

"Then please begin your task. I will come get you when your time is up."

Harry nodded and left to peel toad skin, thinking that maybe, just maybe, Snape would let him be. But knowing Snape, he would probably be watching him very closely. On the plus side, Snape likely had access to books Harry would never see in his life time, and if he found out more about mages, then Harry might be able to finally understand what he had unknowingly become.

XXXXX

The following evening Harry found the Slytherins lurking around the second floor. They looked up as he approached, and Harry thought that the whole thing was pretty suspicious looking. Had anyone else been in the corridor it would not have taken calculus to figure out something was up. But luckily, no professors were prowling about nor were any students in sight.

Without a word to anyone, Harry walked into the girl's toilet. Pansy and Millicent were first to enter and following them were Draco, Blaise, Vincent and Greg. They had not brought anyone else.

"It will be just us for now," Pansy dug around in her robe pocket and pulled out a miniature Nimbus two-thousand-and-one and proceeded to enlarge it, "We should set this up first, and check out more of what you have to offer. We can bring other people in after we figure out what we are going to do."

"Sure," Harry shrugged and pulled out the broom he had used on the night of his detention with McGonagall. The little piece of wood was humming in the palm of his hand. He hoped no one would notice that it was missing before he returned it to the broom shed. Harry closed his eyes for a bit and turned towards the tap that did not work. 'Open.' The hiss was quiet, but in the tile-walled room, the sounds were magnified and echoed. He could hear the others stiffen, robe sleeves sliding over skin, and breaths being held. Harry watched their reactions out of the corner of his eyes, perhaps a little self conscious about his talent. They were all awe stricken, and maybe a little terrified.

Only... They did not step back or even lean away. They looked intensely fascinated, with wide eyes focused on him.

Hermione and Ron had assured him that Parseltongue was indeed one of the scariest things they had ever heard. It wasn't something Harry liked to share with other people.

"Let's go." He quickly enlarged his broom and dropped down the dark pipe, broom at a raised angle to slow his decent. As it began to level off, he tilted the handle down and leisurely flew out of the mouth of the pipe followed by slightly damp and slime covered

Slytherins who had touched the walls of the pipe once or twice. The entrance pipe had a diameter of at least fifteen feet, just large enough for a Basilisk to travel through.

Harry shuddered at the memory.

'Close' Harry hissed, cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

"You're a Parselmouth." Vincent stated, "Is there anything you can't do?" It was meant as a joke... probably, but the Slytherins still looked a bit curious.

"Er... lots of things. I'm pants at divination... and arithmancy... I'm not very knowledgeable in Ancient Runes either... um... welcome to the Chamber of Secrets." Harry held his hand out in gesture. "Be careful, the ceiling is in need of strengthening charms, and watch out for the snake skins and animal bones. I don't want anyone to trip and twist something."

"Thank you mother. It's a bit dank, wouldn't you say?" Blaise smirked, clearly impressed, but not wanting to admit it. Harry shrugged and led the way into the chamber.

"So, does being a mage let you speak parseltongue?" Greg asked.

"No... that is something I was..." Harry did not want to say 'born with' because he didn't actually know if that was true. He always thought that Voldemort had passed along his powers with a piece of his soul, but Neville did not know snake speech. "I've been able to talk to snakes before I walked the mage paths."

The group made their way farther into the chamber, by passing the snake skins and decaying animal bones, some yellowing with age, others white, no more than two years old.

"We could sell the skin and use the money from that to fund our company." Draco noted.

"This isn't a company, Draco." Harry rolled his eyes.

"Assembly then." The blond snorted, "Faction, troop, band of idiots, what ever you want to call it."

"There's something, we should probably have a name." Pansy interjected.

"Like what?" Vincent said, "Like the Death Eaters?"

"Or the Order of the Phoenix..." Harry muttered under his breath. "I guess I don't care, as long as it is something that is representative of what we are intending to do."

"This place is magnificent." Draco gazed into the main chamber, emeralds gleamed coldly from the serpent pillars, and the statue of Salazar was even more impressive than Harry remembered. "It could use a few house elves, but it really is truly amazing."

"We should be called the safe passage." Millicent spoke suddenly, startling the group. "Because that is what we are offering isn't it, a safe passage through the war?"

"I'm not sure it would be a good idea to promise safe passage... I can do my best to protect people, but ultimately I cannot shield everyone." Harry turned and faced Millicent imploringly.

"You are thinking too small." Draco said pointedly, "This is going to be huge. You just don't know it yet." Harry bit his lip, thinking that this was not going to be so easy.

"I want to help, I want to give people another option, but I don't know how I can do this and succeed. I am aware that I will need a lot of help."

"It's a good thing you came to us then." Blaise smirked, "Who better to aid you then purebloods and Slytherins?"

"This will not be about blood-," Harry began but was cut off by Malfoy.

"You are misunderstanding the point," Draco held up a finger, "We are all raised as purebloods, even if we... are not. We understand ministry politics, wizard law... things that you can't learn in books. Mudbloods can try to manipulate the system, but a family name and wizard gold can make a big difference."

"Don't say that word." Harry hissed.

"What, mudblood?" He smirked. Harry briefly wondered if Malfoy realized the irony of his comment.

"It's derogatory and insulting." Draco shrugged and Harry bristled, "You say it again and I-,"

"You'll what? Hurt me?" Draco folded his arms across his chest and raised a challenging eyebrow. Harry was silent for a moment, trying to think of a reasonable threat when he had an epiphany and a wide grin spread across his face.

"Worse," He turned his back on Draco and continued forward until he was in the centre of the large chamber, "I'll ignore you," And with that he transfigured a large round table and seven chairs, taking a seat and watching the Slytherins burst out laughing.

Draco looked a little put off, and his cheeks were flushed.

"I can't believe it," Pansy was practically crying with mirth. Greg and Vincent were howling.

"Oh, as if that's a good deterrent. Dear me Potter. What ever will I do if a Hufflepuff is threatening to ignore me?" Draco scoffed, taking a seat at the conjured table with the other Slytherins. Harry noted that he did not repeat the offensive phrase, which was a good start.

"Okay. What we have so far – I happened upon a wonderful opportunity, and so I talked to Anthony Goldstien, he's-," Pansy began, but Harry cut her off and finished for her.

"Ravenclaw, our year. He's an alright... guy..." Harry trailed off as Pansy glared death at him for interrupting.

"I was going to say," Her eyes glittered in warning, "that he's a gold mine of information, and he's dating Lisa Turpin, who is friends with the sister of the school's number one gossip queen's best friend."

"Wiat-," Harry cocked his head in confusion, "What?"

"Lisa turpin is close to Padma Patil, Parvati's sister, who is friends with Lavender Brown." Millicent grinned towards Pansy and they shared a smile.

"So... why not use Padma? Why so indirect?" Harry was beginning to realize that politics was not something he was gifted in, especially now that Draco was rubbing the bridge of his nose, Blaise raised an eye brow, and even Vincent and Greg were looking at him in disbelief. "What?"

"You poor, poor pitiful wizard." Draco sighed.

"Goldstien is wrapped around my finger." Pansy smirked, "I caught him snogging someone last Thursday evening, and it definitely wasn't Lisa Turpin."

"Wait, you're blackmailing him?" Harry frowned, not liking where this was headed. "I don't want there to be-,"

"Who was it?" Blaise asked grinning.

"Mandy Brocklehurst." Pansy gushed a bit overly dramatic.

"Oh, gross. That girl?" Draco sneered.

"This is not a gossip session." Harry smacked his hand down on the table so that it stung his skin. He knew he was working with fourteen-year-olds and that attention spans were miniscule at best, but he had thought that they could at least be serious when this concerned more than just their futures. "This is not going to be a group that coerces people or manipulates them like pawns on a chess board. I am not Dumbledore."

"Harry... no offence... but grow up." Blaise said quietly, "This is politics."

"Fine." Harry glared hard at Blaise, "Use him. And then when you're done trampling all over his life and you can no longer hold something over his head I hope you watch your backs. He's not necessarily a vengeful person, but I hope you prepare yourselves. We are not trying to instill hatred and make enemies."

"Then what do you propose we do?" Millicent asked.

"Make friends. Trade favors." Harry suggested. "Back scratch a little."

"Our way is quicker." Pansy grumbled.

"We only need a few people in each house." Greg offered, "We just need to make friends with them and see if they are trustworthy."

"Okay, who do we connect with?"

"I recommend Terry Boot or Luna Lovegood from Ravenclaw." Harry remembered that both of them had been more than helpful during the war.

"Loony?" Malfoy looked incredulous. Vincent snorted behind his large hand.

"I see hidden potential in her." Harry smiled mysteriously and fingered the necklace around his throat.

"I agree." Millicent added, "She is well known for being a bit..."

"Loony?" Greg supplied.

"But hardly anyone pays her mind. She could really be a great asset, if she can remember conversations anyway." Millicent was truly beginning to grow on Harry. She was a flexible and thoughtful person, open to other ideas, and she did not mock him with sarcasm. He appreciated that.

"What about from Hufflepuff and Gryffindor?" Greg seemed to growl out the last word as if it angered him.

"I say Hermione, and if possible Dean Thomas." Harry thought.

"You mean if possible, Granger. She's part of the golden trio. I doubt she would go for the alienating Dumbledore bit." Pansy interjected.

"I'm friends with her." Harry replied. "And she's got to be one of the brightest witches of her age. She is an invaluable asset, and a loyal friend. With her, we might get support from Neville-,"

"Who wants that arse?" Draco sniffed indignantly. Harry glared disapprovingly.

"And as for Hufflepuff, you have my self... and Wayne, I suppose, if he ever starts speaking to me again. Maybe Justin... if I can manage that." Harry chose to ignore Draco's previous statement in favor of continuing the planning.

"Neville is all but chained to the headmaster. The old geezer won't let his precious golden boy defect from the cause." Blaise sneered. "And I'm not sure if you can hold your own against him like you claim."

"Only if it's a matter of raw power... I'd lose abominably in politics. I just barely managed to outwit him by the skin of my teeth. I'm not certain I will be given any more opportunities like that. So you are correct. He still has an edge that I do not, hence my appeal to the six of you."

"So... how are we going to do this then?" Vince asked.

"I can start reaching out to Luna." Millicent offered.

"I want Boot." Draco grinned.

"I think... I would like to take Thomas." Pansy wore a subtle smile. "He is in my Arithmancy course. Bloody brilliant with numbers and equations for spells. I can use that as an excuse to get close."

"Please remember that they are not chess pieces." Harry let his head fall into his hands.

"Oh, don't misunderstand," Pansy's small smile grew larger and more predatory, "People are far more entertaining than a chess game."

"You aren't getting it at all." Harry whined half-heartedly.

Chapter 11: The First Task

Harry shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. The November air was chilly with the scent of snow on the wind. Winter was fast approaching and he could feel the excitement from the water element as it was coming into power.

The reason Harry was wandering around on this cold morning was to spend some time with the elements, but mostly he wanted to avoid the negative attention of jealous students and their sudden urge to hex him on sight.

"I don't know how I survived all those years without you." Harry sighed and leaned a little into the wind, "Just knowing that I'm not alone... means so much to me. All those times when no one would tell me anything, when Ron abandoned me, when Dobby had taken all my letters... I thought I was going to go insane if I had to stay in that house much longer. If I had been a mage then... if I had known about you..." Harry continued to ramble on, taking a seat on a large rock so he could look over the lake. The stone warmed under his skin and Harry pressed his forehead against the rough surface in thanks. He curled his hands around his knees and lay on his side to rest as he watched the reflection of a gray sky become distorted on the surface of the water.

The calm that settled over the grounds was relieving, but Harry knew it wouldn't last. The first task was to happen on Monday. Harry wondered how Neville was going to handle facing the dragons, what spells he would use. Maybe he would try to find Neville in Hogsmeade and make sure he would be able to survive the task. He hoped the Hogwarts faculty had been subtly helping Neville, though he was rather irritated that not one of the teachers had bothered to drop a hint his way. Not that he needed it.

Sighing, Harry slid to the ground and rolled onto his back to stare at the sky. Cold bled through his robes and he closed his eyes, shivering, listening to the water lap at the shore. He only had a few hours left before he planned to leave.

Harry was grateful that it was a Hogsmeade weekend so at the very least he could get out of the castle and escape the constant torment of the students. He had a small amount of spending money, although it was barely enough to buy a dinner at the leaky cauldron.

Window shopping was likely the only shopping he would be able to afford.

"I have a question, though I do not expect an answer," Harry mulled over how to word his query. The elements were constantly surprising him and he wished that he could better understand them. "I... why did Fire manifest as a person, as a reflection of me? Can Water and Earth also take the shape of a human? What of Air?"

There was silence, but Harry was patient. He had quite a bit of time to waste before the rest of the school decided to wake up and breakfast.

'difficult,' A whisper of thought floated through his mind after some time had passed, 'against the laws to manipulate without a conduit,' He waited, knowing there was more, and after ten minutes of quiet another whisper came, 'need named dominion over a place. The goblet... is Fire's.'

"I see," Harry ran his fingers over the chilled blades of dry grass, "Then, say I found a goblet of earth... Earth could also manifest?"

'Would I, only before my servant... only before my patient one...' the thought was so gentle and loving that he nearly drifted from his consciousness to bask in the feeling. He shook his head slightly and resumed, still curious about the manifestation.

"Can you manifest as a human other times?" Harry asked, waiting for twenty minutes in silence before receiving an answer.

'Should you ask, should you will... should I wish... I may... Exhausting... Limiting...'

"I would like to see all of you," He closed his eyes and breathed, "eventually."

The magic hummed in a pleased response and he felt warmth spread through his extremities, and then suddenly the energy from his body left him, any tension became loose and his breathing became dangerously shallow. His body went strangely numb, as if all his limbs had fallen asleep, and he had yet to feel them tingle.

"You will be very tired I'm afraid," A voice whispered from somewhere near by. But Harry could not move his head to see, nor could he form words to communicate his distress. Who was it? The voice could have been a boy's or a woman's the tone was low, but not low enough to be a man's.

A whine or strained noise managed to escape from between Harry's lips and his eyes fluttered open to see a long curtain of snow-white hair draped over him, its owner leaning over him, blue-gray eyes like rain. Harry would have thought the face to belong to a young girl, maybe thirteen or fourteen by the looks, but rather oddly, there was nothing to distinguish the being as male or female.

"I'm amazed you are still conscious." It smiled like a cat, "I will not remain long for your sake." Harry wished he could reach out to it, touch him, or her, and he ached deeply for reasons he could not begin to fathom. A moment later the blue eyes shuttered closed and pale lips pressed upon his forehead. And then, while whispering to him a story of depth and movement, of cold and beauty, Harry drifted off to sleep, his thoughts deep below the earth in a dark pool of cool water and thousands of kilometers above the world, floating and freezing and then falling, and falling, falling...

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Harry had come awake sometime around noon, still desperately tired but uncomfortable in a way that forced him into awareness. His body ached horribly, limbs prickling as though they had too long been denied circulation, and he was shivering with cold.

It hurt to move, but he managed to stagger to his feet, wincing as he nearly stumbled over his own limbs.

"And I still have to walk to Hogsmeade," Harry mumbled as he walked back to the castle. He was torn between needing a pepper-up potion and wanting to avoid Madame Pomfrey. She would probably try to detain him for the whole day. "There's always Snape's stores..." Harry considered the risk of getting caught by the Slytherin Head of house and decided that it was better than trying to get by the mediwitch. At least there was the chance that Snape would be somewhere other than his potion store room, and creating a distraction was easy enough.

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Even after consuming a large dose of pepper-up potion, Harry still felt tired and emotionally raw. Snape would know someone had raided his stores, but there would be no proof. Harry didn't have money enough to afford a replacement, so unfortunately that meant stealing.

On the bright side, he had finally arrived in Hogsmeade, trailing behind a group of excited Hufflepuffs. They still ignored him, or shot him accusatory glances, but by now, Harry had grown immune to the rumors and looks and Prophet articles that claimed outrageous stories about him and Neville.

No, today he would try to enjoy himself.

He decided to spend his money on lunch at the three broomsticks.

There were a number of students eating lunch in booths and poor Madame Rosemerta was hurrying about, trying to serve her customers. Harry took a stool at the bar and patiently waited for her to finish up.

Before long Harry had a steaming bowl of soup set in front of him. He smiled and thanked the woman before sipping at his low-cost meal and wishing there was some way to access his bank accounts more easily. He left a sickle on the counter for his soup and drained the bowl before hopping off the stool and walking towards the exit.

"Harry!" Hermione's voice grabbed his attention and his head swiveled in her direction. "Harry, come here." She was waving him over. Neville and Ron sat across from her in the large booth and were twisted in their seats to look at him. Harry hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and shuffled over.

"Have a seat." Ron offered.

"Sure, thanks," Harry slid in next to Hermione and glanced between the Gryffindors. They looked suspicious, that was certain. For one thing, Harry was surprised to see Ron speaking to Neville again. It hadn't even been that long...

"How are things going?" Hermione leaned in a bit closer than Harry would have liked.

"Fine, I guess." He shrugged.

"You look kind of tired." Neville said, concern etched in his tone.

"Yeah... didn't uh, sleep very well last night." Harry lied. He watched them exchange a look.

"Are you worried about Monday?" Hermione's hand brushed Harry's in a gesture of comfort. Harry went very still, disbelief evident in his expression, although not for the reasons that the golden trio were assuming. The task had hardly crossed his mind. His plan was simple and easy. Break the anti-summoning charm, cast the summoning spell, and then walk away with the golden egg without breaking a sweat.

"The first task is Dragons." Neville stated rather suddenly, "I don't know if that will put your mind at ease, but I thought you should know." The boy-who-lived fidgeted in his seat. Harry blinked, and then started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Ron scowled.

"You don't believe me?" Neville asked with an offended look.

"No, I believe you," Harry continued to laugh, clutching the table for support.

"He's gone mental," Ron said, wide eyed. Harry could not stop. The sheer irony, the whole bloody statement was, on some morbid level, highly amusing. That Neville could have been so much different from the one he knew, that he would say something like that...

"I already knew it was dragons Neville, but thank you. Maybe I can help you out on the second task?" Harry was still stifling his chuckles. "Don't concern yourself with me about dragons. I can handle those."

The trio gave him a weird look before Neville was distracted by two figures who walked into the bar.

"Remus!" Neville jumped out of his seat and went to greet the man. Harry glanced up at the old marauder and felt his heart rate speed up. Next to him was a great black dog, tail wagging, tongue lolling.

'Oh God,' Harry thought, choking back a sob. It was his godfather, but not his god father, and he was alive. Tears fell easily onto the table before he was aware of them, his hands shaking.

"Harry?" Hermione whispered curiously. He numbly turned at the sound of his name. "What's the matter?"

With that Harry snapped back to him self, wiping away his tears in embarrassed haste.

"Nothing, sorry, I guess I'm more tired than I thought." Harry bolted for the door, but before he could leave Harry was snagged by Neville.

"Harry, you remember Remus right?"

"It's good to see you again Mr. Potter. How is your shielding charm coming?"

"Fine Mr. Lupin," Harry looked askance at the large dog, heart beating as if to hammer its way out of his chest. He was certain that Remus could smell his fear and hurt, and if not, his beating heart made more than enough sound to be heard. Inwardly, he swore at him self for having such pitiful control.

"Padfoot's a good dog, he won't bite you," Remus said reassuringly. Harry nodded, swallowing slowly. Sirius sat back on his haunches and played the part of a timid dog to show that he did not mean any harm. Harry managed a weak smile and shifted awkwardly closer, fighting the urge to smother the poor dog in hugs and kisses and apologies.

"It's good to meet you Padfoot." He choked. Sirius huffed in a soft reply, pressing his nose into Harry's palm. His fingers ran easily over the dog's face and ears, and he found him self kneeling in front of the animagus and petting him and trying to mask the trembling in his hands. His throat was caught on the edge of a thousand sorry's, his mind repeating the word like a mantra in his thoughts.

When it all became too much, Harry hastily stood, said good bye, and left the Three Broomsticks.

He had wanted to leave Hogsmeade in a hurry, mostly to avoid speaking to or seeing anyone else for fear he would collapse and start crying. The last thing he needed right now was a pity party. Harry just wanted to go back to Hogwarts as fast as he could, but as he turned the last corner out of the small town he ended up plowing into someone else.

Strong hands gripped his shoulders to steady him and Harry could not stop the tears from spilling over. Hastily he wiped his eyes and looked up to see...

"Charlie?" He whispered a bit perplexed.

"That's my name, do I know you?" Charlie Weasley asked.

"Oh... um. No sorry..." Harry backed away and ran his sleeves quickly under his eyes. "Er... I just go to school with your younger brothers..."

"You're in Ron's year right?" the elder boy smiled gently. Harry shrugged and nodded. "What's your name?"

"Harry," he shifted wondering how he might escape, "Er... Harry Potter."

"Ah, so you are the other Hogwarts Champion." Charlie pat him on the shoulder reassuringly, "Don't worry. You'll do fine."

"T-thanks" Harry tilted his head to one side a bit bewildered. This was the longest conversations with the second oldest son of the Weasley Family he had had, and Harry was surprised how mellow and reassuring he was.

Then Harry remembered that he worked with Dragons. It was probably why he was here in the first place.

"Want to get a bit to eat?" Charlie glanced at his watch. "Unless you've already eaten?"

"Er... I had some soup," Harry shrugged, and flushed when his stomach growled reproachfully.

"Well, I guess your stomach's made up its mind. What about you? Up for something substantial? My treat."

"Um... thanks." Harry offered a tentative smile.

"That's better," Charlie grinned, "No time to be sad on a Hogsmeade trip."

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Charlie sat across from Harry at a small pub Harry had never been in before. It wasn't quite as busy as the Three Broomsticks, and for that Harry was immensely grateful.

"What's that?" Harry asked, noticing a large, white fang wrapped with leather and hanging about his neck. "Is that a dragon's tooth?"

"Yep. I work with dragons. This," Charlie fingered the incisor fondly, "this is a Norwegian Ridgeback's baby tooth, one from his second set of teeth."

"Second set?"

"Yep, Norwegian Ridgebacks have three sets of teeth and their permanent teeth only come in after they are about three or four years old. They grow pretty fast."

"Cool." Harry wanted to touch it, but didn't dare ask, "I didn't know that."

"Do you want to see it?" Charlie reached up and pulled the leather cord from his neck. "Here."

Harry held the tooth carefully, running his index finger over the edge and then traced the sharp point. A thrill went through him, and he felt his magic briefly sweep over the fang before fading. Harry handed it back before the magic became too interested in it.

"Thank you. I can't imagine how interesting it must be to work with dragons. But it's probably pretty dangerous too."

"It can be, especially if you don't know what you're doing."

'Good thing I'll know what I'm doing then.' Harry thought as he nodded to the older man.

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It was early. Too early to fight dragons.

And it was loud.

Students and faculty crowded together with reporters and Ministry officials in the stands above the Quidditch pitch. The field had been converted into a makeshift stage for the first task. Transfigured rocks and boulders dotted the area making for mediocre shelters against jets of searing flame. The area was practically humming with protective spells and wards.

Harry and the three other champions waited anxiously, or in Harry's case, impatiently, for an official of the Triwizard tournament to direct them into the tent to select their dragon and order of appearance.

Finally the champions were lead into the tent where Rita Skeeter began to assault them with seemingly innocuous questions that she would later twist to suit her story. Harry and Neville ignored her and waited for Bagman to explain the task and let them draw their dragon miniatures.

After having the task explained, Bagman held out the purple silk sack and Fleur drew first.

It came as no surprise when Harry pulled out the Swedish Short-Snout, and of course that left Neville with that horrid tempered Hungarian Horntail.

Harry went first.

The crowd cheered, though most of it was profanities of one sort or another. And Bagman began to make with the commentary.

Harry ignored them and stood very still.

The Swedish Short-Snout was beautiful. She had a long, graceful neck and an almost bird-like head with three pairs of horns, a striking eggshell-white against her silvery blue scales. Her blue eyes watched him warily as he approached. When she let out a warning hiss, he stopped.

Wand at the ready, he flicked it casually, although no magic left the wand itself. The gesture had been more for show, to keep away some invasive questions and unwanted articles by a certain beetle animagus.

Wandless magic tore open the anti-summoning charms placed on the false egg and the dragon shuffled uneasily over her nest. He knew she could feel what he was doing, but he remained calm and kept watching her.

The crowd had become silent and even Bagman only whispered, though he had little to comment about anyway since he had no idea what Harry was doing. His lack of movements and non-verbal spell work left the spectators in the dark.

He wanted to subdue her somehow for he had no desire to watch a mother dragon rage about losing a child, no matter that it was false. Harry knew better than to try legilimency on a dragon. Their minds were so wild that they could drive a person insane if the connection lasted too long, rather he thought to send her asleep. This way no harm would come to anyone.

With another vague flick of his wand he willed the beast into dreams, her head drooping to tuck under her wing. The crowd gasped collectively.

"Accio golden egg." He intoned with a practiced flick of the wrist, his only true spell. The egg zoomed over to him and in less than five minutes he had won his prize.

"A-And Potter has the egg, without even... not a scratch, he hardly moved to... How?" Bagman rambled. The crowd erupted in exclamations and cheers.

Harry barley glanced at the judges.

They gave him tens across the board, except for Karkaroff's nine point five; but he was a coward and a Death Eater anyway. Not important. Harry was not competing for glory; rather he was complying with the magical contract to ensure his continued stay at Hogwarts.

Following him was Fleur and the Welsh Green. The crowd was far more animated as the girl ducked and dodged the sporadic fireballs sent after her.

Harry supposed that in comparison, his display had been boring and uneventful. The crowd really ate up the danger and suspense, but little did he know several of the adults eyed him with interest and awe.

Krum came next, facing off with the Chinese Fireball and then it was Neville's turn.

Harry watched in interest as the boy nervously walked out of the tent. Cheers and hoots roared through the crowd and Harry might have been a little jealous.

Neville's retrieval of the egg was clever, if not a little dangerous. He had cast a smell masking spell over a small clump of something, possibly some sort of plant material, and levitated it over to the dragon's nest to fall on top of the golden egg. Harry was impressed at the accuracy and knew that his aim was likely very important. As soon as the clump settled onto the gold egg, Neville cast finite incantatem and Harry quickly recognized the clump for what it was.

Dragon's bane.

The boy had brought dragon's bane, of all things. Harry was torn between feeling impressed and wanting to shake Neville for his inconsideration of the mother and her eggs.

However, there was more than just dragon's bane in that lump of mashed herbs. The concoction had been fortified with what smelled to Harry like mint and peppergrass. It was like a dung bomb for dragons, worthy of the son of a marauder.

It truly was a brilliant plan, save for the danger to the real eggs.

The Dragon went into a fit, vacating the area of the nest. She hovered over her eggs, trying to figure out a way to protect them, but her disgust and aversion to the concoction forced her to hiss and turn away.

That was when Neville bounded forwards to snatch the egg.

Idiot that he was, he seemed to forget that the beast breathed fire, and he had to dodge several times before getting close enough to steal his prize.

But he did manage, and there was a deafening roar from the crowd as he succeeded.

Harry added to the noise excitedly, glad that Neville and the eggs survived.

The first task was over.

Chapter 12: Yule and Between Tasks

McGonagall was far too excited about dancing lessons.

There were two weeks left until the Yule ball and already she was obsessing over preparations. Frankly, Harry was not looking forward to the awkward night of adolescents perusing punch bowls and hugging the walls in their insecurity. McGonagall continued to mention lesson times, muttering about traditions and honor under her breath during transfiguration or in the halls. It was probably the one time in Harry's memory that her pureblood status was ever so blatantly apparent.

Then there was her futile discussion with a baffled professor Sprout about colors and decorations that might complement the Hogwarts décor.

That had been amusing.

Professor sprout had her own mild obsession with magical plants and did not have time for McGonagall's project on the upcoming ball. And honestly, what had the deputy headmistress been thinking? Professor Sprout was almost always up to her elbows in soil. As if professor Sprout cared about things like dances. It was almost as ridiculous as asking Madame Hooch.

McGonagall's fanaticism about the dance was becoming ridiculous. Harry had either been too blind or too busy in his previous fourth year to have missed her raving obsession, although to be fair, he had been pretty stressed over being a Hogwarts champion at age fourteen with hardly enough magical experience to duel a pigeon.

Compared to defeating Voldemort, this tournament was cake.

The dance lessons were to be held sometime in the evening. Because he was a Hogwarts champion, he was required to have a date although he was still undecided who he should ask. He was determined not to leave finding his date to the last minute this time around, but unfortunately his circle of friends was miniscule at best and again he found him self cursing the other Harry's incredible lack of social skills.

At this point he would rather wish Snape a happy birthday in a frilly pink apron than ask one of the Hufflepuff girls. Not because they were Hufflepuffs, but because they had ignored him like he was an outsider along with the rest of the house.

Well, on the one hand he was and outsider, but they had no knowledge of that. The seventh year Hufflepuffs were understandably angry with Harry for taking away their chance to compete fairly, and the younger years were angry on the seventh years' behalf. But instead of confronting him about it, like a Hufflepuff likely would, they ignored him as if he wasn't worth the effort to hear out.

Most of the Gryffindor girls were people he would rather not ask. He knew them, but they barely acknowledged his existence or they were already taken. It amused him to contemplate asking a Slytherin, but really, who was he kidding? Pansy and Millicent were purebloods whose parents were in Voldemort's inner circle. They had general appearances to keep up after all. Being friends with a half-blood Hufflepuff was different than going to a dance with one and Harry didn't fancy being about four inches shorter than his date.

Harry leaned against a stone wall and watched absently as students milled about. He ran through a mental list of girls he knew and then a ray of hope descended upon him like a flood of water. It was almost silly that he did not think of her first.

He could ask Luna.

She would be perfect.

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Harry waited outside of the entrance to the Ravenclaw dormitories for Luna. He did not own dress robes and so transfigured one of his school robes to compensate. They were simple, black with a delicate green leaf and vine pattern interwoven at the hems, courtesy of the earth element. Fire and Water had seemingly argued when Harry first transfigured the robe trying to weave in patterns of their liking, but the reds and copper-golds clashed horridly with the blue-greens and whites and in their anger with each other the robe was scribbled with a conglomeration of unnecessary and unwearable color.

Air decided to intervene and turned the robe invisible, successfully eliminating the color issue, but also rendering the robe un-wearable. Harry was inwardly relieved that he was in the dorm room alone. If his dorm mates had seen the crazy fit the magic was having over a piece of clothing...

He had rolled his eyes in exasperation and finally Earth had had enough and designed the robes Harry currently wore. The simple fact that his magic was arguing with itself unnerved him. What if they decided to start changing his clothes in the middle of the corridors?

Harry was pulled out of his thoughts when Luna stepped out into the hall. She was wearing a lovely blue gown with large blue flowers pinned about in odd places. On her ears were tinny bells that rang when she moved. In her hair piled atop her head was another, smaller blue flower and it wiggled its petals like fingers when he glance at it.

"Hello Harry." Luna was beaming.

"You look lovely, Luna. I love that flower." Harry pointed to the waving blue thing in her hair. The petals stopped waving in favor of curling into the shape of hearts.

"I think the lobburples have taken over its pollen. I see you are still wearing that necklace I gave you. It's a good thing you never took it off, or you might have missed your chance to see a snowperson. Was it very beautiful?" Luna asked. Harry looked at her quizzically for a moment, not understanding.

"Snowperson?"

"You saw one."

"Oh."

"Would you like me to make you another?"

"If it doesn't inconvenience you," Harry grinned at the girl. Odd as she was, she was still one of the coolest people he had ever met.

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Draco had practically swooped down on him the moment he entered the hall with Luna. He sneered at her with Pansy at his elbow. She looked bored, but her eyes darted between Luna and Harry with a questioning gaze.

"You asked Loony?"

"Don't call her that," Harry quickly defended Luna.

"What is that... thing in your hair?" the blond continued, leaning over Luna in a futile attempt to intimidate her. The thing in her hair made a rude gesture and spat water onto Draco's robes.

"You deserved that." Harry said scathingly and made to lead Luna away but to his surprise he was roughly jerked back by the Slytherin. A bit ungracefully, he turned around to face the other boy "Merlin, Draco, what's your problem?"

"Nothing. I just want to talk to you." He looked a little sheepish.

"Yes, well, insulting my date and dragging me about isn't the best way to keep my attention."

"You don't need to be angry, I just-,"

"We can talk after I finish with my champion obligation, but you will be civil to Luna, otherwise you will not hear a word from me."

Pansy snorted when Draco began to whine, and tugged Draco away before he could further embarrass himself.

Shortly thereafter, McGonagall signaled the champions to the center of the dance floor where Harry and Luna took their positions next to the other champions and their dates.

"You dance surprisingly well," Harry commented as Luna gracefully moved with him.

"Why thank you Harry," Luna smiled beautifully, "I was taught when I was very young. Most purebloods learn their steps by age seven."

"Oh right... Sorry, I completely forgot you were a pureblood." Harry bit his lip, "I suppose I should have remembered, but blood status has never been something I've concerned myself with." And it was true. He only remembered Draco was a pureblood because he was so obnoxious about it and he only remembered the dark lord was half blood because it was so ironic.

"Most people overlook the Lovegood name, but I don't mind. Blood status is a myth." Luna smiled. He had almost laughed when the word 'myth' came out of her mouth, but found himself only able to nod solemnly in agreement.

When the dance came to a close, Luna excused herself to somewhere to find something Harry didn't quite catch. She said it was important, so Harry walked over to the snack table and grabbed himself a cauldron cake. What ever it was, Harry wasn't about to keep her. If she said it was important, then it must be.

Quietly, Harry took up a position on the wall and watched the other students mill about, some dancing, some talking. Pansy was keeping Draco quite distracted and she winked when she caught Harry watching. Secretly Harry was glad for the break.

"Hey Harry." The boy-who-lived held a cup half-filled with punch, "You looked like you did well."

"Weren't you supposed to be concentrating on your own dance?" Harry replied blithely and Neville flushed pink.

"Er... well, I could probably do that dance in my sleep, so..."

"That's right. Luna told me that purebloods learn their steps by age seven." Harry thought about how Ron had never learned to dance and decided it was perhaps because his family was so large, and maybe Mr. and Mrs. Weasley never had the time.

"Heh, yeah, well, the Potters are an old name too." Neville began but stopped, "Er... I'm not making you uncomfortable am I?" Harry shook his head.

"No. they died before I really got to know them, so I don't mind," Harry fibbed. No, Harry did not know them, but he still felt their absence from his life like a gaping hole through his heart.

"I wasn't too surprised to see that you could dance. The Potters and my family were good friends. Who taught you to dance anyway?"

"McGonagall, in her crash-course lessons," Harry smirked.

"You learned to dance that well after a few lessons? I remember it taking me ages to get the steps right."

"She was my first dance instructor." Harry shrugged. It was true after all. Professor McGonagall had given him extra lessons in his first fourth year to make certain he didn't embarrass the school. He smiled fondly at the memory but frowned as he thought about how no such attentions had been offered this year. And he certainly wouldn't have bothered asking Professor Sprout even if he had needed a refresher course.

"I must say that is impressive." Neville grinned easily. "My Gran taught me. All I remember though is how much I hated learning."

"Who knew it would come in handy, huh?" Harry glanced behind Neville and saw one of the Patil twins glowering. "By the way, your date seems to be glaring daggers in this direction. You might try paying a little attention to her."

"Er," Neville glanced over his shoulder, "Yeah, guess your right. Do you want to come sit with us?" He sounded hopeful.

"I'd like to dance a bit more Harry." Luna tugged delicately on his sleeve making Harry jump in surprise. The Ravenclaw girl had snuck up on him without a sound.

"Looks like I've got my hands full," He apologized and took Luna back out onto the dance floor.

Out of the corner of his eye Harry noticed Draco pouting with a frustrated Pansy rolling her eyes.

Harry twisted Luna around and turned to bring Hermione and Krum into view. They looked like they might devour each other.

Harry blinked at the passion between them. Yuck...

Another turn.

Ron looked positively bored out of his mind, watching from the outskirts.

Turn.

Snape lurked in the shadows, looking miserable and probably wishing he was down in his dungeons brewing something vile instead of chaperoning a bunch of adolescent dunderheads. He was conversing softly with the Headmaster, most likely complaining judging by the look on their faces.

Harry brought his attention back to his date and smiled. She really looked beautiful. Her eyes shone like gems, strangely clear and intense, and Harry remembered that she had a talent for seeing things that others overlooked.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Harry asked her.

"Yes. I think they will do nicely. So, what do you think you have to do for the second task?" Luna asked, smiling at something or other, maybe him or someone else.

"Go swimming I suppose."

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Harry sighed and leaned back into his chair.

"At the moment," He said quietly, "I cannot do much more than fulfill my magical contract."

"But we should be doing something," Draco growled. His voice echoed throughout the chamber.

"Don't be an idiot Draco." Millicent rolled her eyes, "We're not a bunch of Gryfindors."

"This is not about action, Draco, it's about protection. I am offering refuge, not resistance." Harry watched Draco flush angrily.

"I think this is a good idea, but Harry, you can't honestly think you could protect everyone." Hermione interjected. She sat between Blaise and Luna. Harry glanced at Dean Thomas and Terry Boot who looked curious but also unconvinced.

"You might be surprised." Pansy sneered at the Gryffindor girl, "Do you know anything about mages?" Of course Pansy didn't know much of anything about them either but she wasn't about to admit it. Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"I am not especially knowledgeable, no." she flushed, and Harry was certain that it would only take until the end of the evening before Hermione would absorb any available knowledge on mages that the Hogwarts Library had to offer. Not that there was much...

"I want to know why we're necessary." Terry Boot spoke up.

"We need contacts throughout the houses," Blaise explained, "Not all Death Eater children are in Slytherin."

"There are kids, I know there are, who need help. They aren't strong enough to defend themselves against adults versed in the dark arts, and in some cases, those adults are their parents. I said I am offering protection. You, I suppose would be something of an ambassador, a connection. Some of these kids can't go to Dumbledore-,"

"You mean won't," Hermione interrupted again, "If they don't want to be Death Eaters, they should speak to Dumbledore. He would definitely help them."

"And use them as pawns." Greg snorted.

"Dumbledore is an honorable man." Hermione hissed.

"He does what he thinks is best. I won't fault him for that, but he does not have the ability nor the resources to identify and protect these kids-,"

"And you do?" she challenged. There was a long moment of silence where Harry stared grimly at this reflection of his once faithful friend.

"I will." He said firmly, "I am not so bound by rules or regulations as is the headmaster. The highest level of protection he can offer is the fidelius charm, powerful spell work and certainly effective, but the flaw is in the keeper. As soon as Voldemort knows who the keeper is it's all over. Dumbledore is strong, but he is limited by his age and by his view of the world. He is a great man and an even better tactician, but he has a tendency to view people as playing pieces. He cannot offer what I am offering."

"I don't believe you." Dean said quietly, "Or rather, I can't believe you. You say you can hold your own against you-know-who? Prove it."

Harry frowned and stood.

"Are you sure?" He asked. Dean nodded. Hermione and Terry also looked skeptical, but Luna was grinning happily tying a bit of yarn around a small stone.

Harry walked several paces away and closed his eyes

'They doubt you,' He thought, 'will you show them your power? They will not trust me if we cannot convince them. Will you do this for me?'

There was distant laughter and a swell of power rushed into the chamber. Energy and magic were drawn from the stones and water, leaving them cold with the beginnings of frost forming over their surfaces. And then warmth and heat began to swirl lazily around the room, centering on Harry and pulling outwards.

The hairs on the student's arms and legs stood on end as the heat flowed across their skin. Currents of green and gold energy spun circles around the young witches and wizards before being drawn to Harry as a focus point. Hermione let out a gasp as her will and determination seemed to flood out of her. Draco began to giggle and Greg was already laughing along with Terry who was holding his side. Pansy was hugging Luna, cheeks flushed with bliss.

And seeing this, Harry brought the display to a stop before he drove them into madness. He waited for several minutes for the effects to neutralize. When Hermione regained her senses she looked at Harry as though he were a specimen to be dissected and analyzed.

Terry looked caught between terror and need. Everyone was gazing at him intently. Awe and devotion was plain on their faces, and where there might have been doubt there was left only certainty and conviction.

"Okay." Dean whispered, "I'm in."

"I'll help as much as I can," Terry swallowed nervously.

"I was already in, but my that felt terrifying," Luna sighed happily.

"I don't know if I can be party to this. I refuse to work against Dumbledore." Hermione looked pained as though it cost her to say no. Harry was uncertain if it was so wise to let loose like that. He didn't want people joining because he was powerful...

"I would not ask you to work against him." Harry slowly returned to his seat, "I won't stop you from telling the headmaster about me or this group or our purpose. I trust you that far. But you must tell me now how much you intend to tell Dumbledore. You are smart, very smart, and your skills and abilities are highly valuable, but so are the lives I am and will be protecting, and the Headmaster cannot know who they are. I've drawn up two contracts: the first is one that all of you must swear to if you wish to leave this chamber, the second is to be agreed to if you intend to participate fully as a member."

The first contract was an agreement that no names in relation to the group would be communicated in anyway to another person outside of the group with the exception of Harry Potter, in which case a violator would be compelled with a modified babbling charm. Any time they might try to communicate the names to someone outside the group they would be unable to speak or write or gesture coherently. Essentially they would experience a complete loss of control over their body.

Warily, everyone signed the contract after Harry explained the effects if it should be broken.

"I'm aware that there are ways around this contract, I will warn you ahead of time, that should you be informed that you are going to be questioned about this group under veritaserum, you will find yourself unable to legally consent. This will make it a bit more difficult I hope."

The second contract, for those who wanted to participate fully, was an unbreakable vow.

Harry wasn't playing games.

Hermione had been the only one to leave before the second contract was made.

"This is not because I don't trust you Harry, but I have faith in Dumbledore, and I will help as much as I can in small ways, but I cannot make anymore commitment than that." She explained. Harry nodded.

"I understand. If ever you change your mind, you know where to find me."

Hermione was gone.

Nine were left.

Harry took a breath.

He could do this.

Chapter 13: Flash Bang

"I can't figure it out, Ron. The thing just keeps screeching every time I open it!" Neville leaned over with his elbows on his open book. He looked haggard and on the verge of pulling out his hair.

Harry smiled from his secluded corner of the library. Neville had never been... subtle, that was certain. Madame Pince shushed them in warning, and the two boys continued their discussion with a lowered volume. Harry grinned and scrawled a note onto a sheet of paper and added a few charms to the parchment.

Once he was satisfied, he walked over to where Neville and Ron sat "studying" or "doing homework" and deliberately set his note on top of the book the boy was supposed to be reading. It was folded six ways giving Harry plenty of time to quickly and quietly make his exit.

Neville flushed, looking at the note and back at the boy who had just disappeared into the hall.

"What d'you think that was all about?" Ron asked watching his friend carefully unfold the note.

"Take the egg for a bath in private?" Neville frowned.

And then Ron said, "A bath?"

And then Neville read, "This note will self-destruct in four seconds. What's that supposed to mean?"

Four seconds later his book was sprouting a mini mushroom cloud that contained a flash-bang shockwave loud enough for Madame Pince to ban them from the library for an undetermined amount of time.

Their faces were gray with ash and there were spots before their eyes. It was so unfortunate that they didn't get the joke, but farther down the corridor outside the library, Harry was grinning. He owed Neville some help after all, but that didn't mean he wouldn't get any amusement out of it.

Besides, he thought, he was supposed to be part of a secret organization now, right? Why not act the part?

Later it was Hermione who, between fits of laughter, tried to explain the reference to Ron and Neville, but they still didn't quite grasp why Harry had given them an exploding note, nor did they get what was so funny about it.

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A few weeks later found Harry in the middle of February. It was, in fact, two weeks into the month exactly.

Harry had never thought much about Valentine's Day, mostly because his life had revolved around an evil mad man. He had never had time to think about those sort of things or make those important observations, that it, until now.

It was a wonder to notice what happened to the female population.

Their eyes were softer.

And they spoke quieter.

And they blinked a lot more.

The boys, many of them, were standing straighter.

They fiddled uncomfortably.

And they looked nervous.

Like they forgot something.

And their girlfriends looked at them expectantly

And they began to sweat.

And Harry was somewhat glad he did not have a girlfriend, because he had no idea it was Valentine's Day until he saw the ridiculous decorations Dumbledore had asked for dotting the walls of the corridors. Merlin, even the tables had pink and white table cloths.

Everyone seemed so giggly.

Even his magic seemed in the mood to celebrate love, because every once in a while there was a tugging on his hair or a tickling behind his ear.

"Happy Valentine's Day to you too," Harry murmured as he made his way back to the Hufflepuff common room to change his clothes. His magic purred with affection and Harry rolled his eyes.

He was going flying.

That was that.

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From high up Harry could see the grounds of Hogwarts stretch out for several acres bordered by the forbidden forest. It was a reasonably nice day, though snow still blanketed the ground and his breath was a constant reminder that it was still winter. The sun was out however and despite the bitter cold air, Harry was rather warm.

After flying for an hour, he was sweating heavily beneath his winter robes. He hardly needed the heavy black and yellow scarf, though he figured he would keep the hat rather than risk hypothermia. After all, he heard somewhere that a person loses most of their body heat through their ears... or something like that.

The point was, he was hot, and he needed to cool off. So he leaned forward on his broom and dropped into a steep dive, letting the wind rush his face. At the last possible moment, he pulled up sharply and touched his feet to the ground.

"Wow! That dive was amazing!" A voice bellowed from several yards away. Harry glanced up to see Cedric waving at him from the stands. Next to him was Cho Chang, and Harry had to bite his lip to keep from laughing... or crying. It was difficult to decide.

Instead of replying, Harry raised his arm, returning the wave, offering a small smile.

"You ever consider joining the Hufflepuff team?" Cho called excitedly, a bright smile on her face. Cedric said something to her and pointed in his direction. It would not have surprised Harry if

Cedric were telling her about his reputation on a broom. He shrugged and made to put his broom away in the school shed.

A few minutes later found Harry walking back up to the school. It had hit him as soon as Cho had asked if he was planning on trying out next year, but the truth was, there would not be a next year at Hogwarts. Dumbledore was going to expel him, and he would not be given the chance to play on a team.

"Hey, Potter, wait up." Cedric jogged up behind him.

"What is it?" Harry asked with a sigh. He did not mean to sound so irritated, but that was how it came out.

"Sorry, did we interrupt you?" He asked awkwardly. Harry glanced up at the taller boy and saw the concerned face of the boy he accidentally killed and he felt a pang of guilt throb in his chest.

"No, I'm sorry... I was... I was just... thinking about things is all."

"That's alright. I was worried that you were mad at us for interrupting."

"It's... nothing." There was a long pause.

"You talked to me earlier this year about Quidditch." Cedric said, "At the time I thought... I figured you... I never thought you could fly like that." He managed to stammer out his praises and Harry offered a small smile.

"I've been practicing." Harry shrugged casually, "By the way... what were you and Cho doing in the Quidditch stands?"

"Er..." Cedric fumbled for an answer, blushing like mad, "Well... it's Valentine's Day. When you're a bit older you might..."

"Spare me the details." Harry grinned, "I never knew Cho was into snogging in the Quidditch stands..."

"S-snogging... yeah um..."

"You don't mean to tell me you-," Harry sputtered flushing pink, "You... and her were-? While I was flying? Merlin Cedric!"

"Er..."

"I could have seen-," Harry was embarrassed beyond belief. He rarely if ever thought about sex. He hardly knew anything about it considering his history with his relatives and then the fact that his thoughts were more often consumed by an evil wizard bent on world domination and destroying his life. Other things had been on his mind rather than wondering about relationships and things people did for... recreation...

He knew the basic mechanics... at least he thought he did.

'face it Harry,' He thought, 'you're a failure as a normal teenage boy.'

"Er... you aren't... going to say anything, are you?"

"No!" Harry growled, cheeks still bright red, then a bit calmer, "no."

"Good." Cedric looked relieved. "So uh... you should come to tryouts next year. I'm sure you could easily take my place after I graduate. You'd make a fantastic seeker with those dives."

"I'd like that," Harry said gratefully, but he knew that although he would have liked to play, he was not going to be given the opportunity. It was just as well, he thought. No need to give them an unfair advantage.

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"Get any Valentines from anyone Potter?" Draco smirked and slid next across the table from Harry who was reading a paragraph on animagus. He had finally found the time to study the theory on human transfiguration. He received permission from McGonagall to use the books in the restricted section, and was warned adamantly about the dangers of attempting the animagus transformation without an instructor and Harry reassured her with a promise that he would never attempt the animagus transformation by himself.

Of course, only an idiot would try that. If anything were to go wrong, or if his animagus turned out to be something that breathed underwater, for instance, and he panicked and couldn't change back,

he could die or be seriously injured. No, Harry would at least have one of his friends there to spot for him. ... At least in theory...

"Well did you?" Draco asked in annoyed tone.

"Hm." Harry grunted noncommittally, intent on finishing the last two sentences on the page.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Draco sneered.

"No, I haven't." Harry glanced at the page number, committed it to memory and shut the book, giving his full attention to the blond Slytherin. "What is it you need?"

"What are you reading?"

"Human transfiguration,"

"Really?"

"Really."

"You are the weirdest kid I know, Potter. It's a holiday. Don't you have a date or something?" Draco scrutinized him and Harry raised an eyebrow.

"No." Harry answered simply, wishing he had taken the book somewhere he wouldn't have been interrupted. He didn't feel up to entertaining a bored Draco Malfoy or anyone else at the moment. Escape would be impossible now. There was a pause while Draco tried to figure him out. Perhaps if he hadn't ignored and or avoided the other boy for the past couple of days, Draco wouldn't have been bothering him.

Harry couldn't understand why the Slytherin wouldn't leave him alone. But then again, it wasn't just Draco. Terry had been talking to him more, and Dean sometimes sat down with him while he was reading up on different spells or when he was taking notes for his half-hearted research on dimensional travel, which of course often led to no where. He wasn't as tenacious as Hermione when it came to finding information.

Even this Animagus research was taking a long time, even without the odd interruptions.

"So, do you know what you're going to be?" Draco gestured towards the book.

"No." Harry shrugged, "But I have high hopes."

Chapter 14: The Second Task and the Capture of Rita Skeeter

Harry watched indifferently as the waves lapped against the shore. Once again, the task was held at an unreasonable hour of the morning, in February no less, meaning the lake was probably icy cold, not that Harry was worried. The water wouldn't freeze him to death... probably.

He wondered who his hostage to save was. Probably Luna because that was who he had asked to the ball.

Out of the corner of his eyes Harry saw the school headmasters eyeing him warily, and he wondered if Dumbledore had shared his mage status with them. But knowing Dumbledore, he was still withholding the important information that others really ought to know. Maybe they had guessed, or perhaps they were wondering how Harry figured out a way to enter his name into the goblet when they should be more worried about how Neville's name was entered.

Typical wizarding common sense.

Krum and Fleur had looks of determination on their faces; Neville looked ready to be sick.

"You'll do alright, Neville." Harry offered a smile despite his fatigue. It had been nearly a week and a half that his magic had been bothering him, at times taking his energy suddenly and without warning, at others pushing it into him with a rush that made him dizzy with pleasure.

Sometimes he would be dragging his feet, staggering to his next class and then in a moment he would snap awake and magic would begin to pour into him at an alarming rate. It was so sudden in fact that before his class mates noticed the flow of magic they became giddy and would stagger, leaning against each other for support as if drunk. When that happened, Harry would breach the anti apparition wards and barricade himself within the Chamber of secrets where he would beg the magic to let him raise containment wards so the rest of the school would continue its day without disturbance.

Those had been strange times, Harry recalled, as his magic saturated the chamber while his body twitched and strained to hold the power without giving out, and his magic was merciless with him,

stretching him, pushing him nearly over the edge so that when it left him he could do little more than curl into a ball and shudder with the loss.

"You alright?" Neville asked. Harry nodded.

"I'm ready, I'll be fine, and so will you." He said.

"Well our champions are ready for the second task, which will start on my whistle," Bagman's voice boomed out over the lake with the aid of the sonorous charm, "They have precisely one hour to recover what has been taken from them. On the count of three, then. One... two... three!" (GOF p.493)

The three champions raced into the water, Krum using human transfiguration, Fluer used a bubblehead charm, and Neville thrust some gillyweed down his throat. Harry slowly stripped off his shoes and socks, then set his robes to the side, wearing only a T-shirt and jeans.

Harry slowly waded into the icy water, feet turning steadily numb. Once up to his waste the water began to turn warm and Harry sighed in relief.

"Thank you." He ran his fingers over the surface of the water thankfully. Weeds tangled around his ankles and Harry laughed and continued to walk deeper. Eventually his head disappeared under the surface protected by the bubblehead charm but then when the water banished the charm and rushed into him he found that he didn't need the charm at all. At first it was strange and somewhat painful with water filling his lungs, but after the agony passed he found that his magic was sustaining him without the use of air.

Merpeople circled him, but did not come near. Gindylows actually moved out of his way and he encountered nothing to impede his progress.

As he suspected, Luna had been selected for him to 'save' or take back. There was also Ron, Hermione, and Fleur's little sister, all but dead to the world. It was surprising that none of the others, who had left in such a hurry had gotten there before him.

Sighing Harry decided to waste time and untie the seaweed manually from around Luna's ankles and wrists. He really didn't need to win this round so he found a nice little spot to hide while he waited for the others to claim their hostages.

Like last time Fleur was unable to reach her sister and Harry took his cue to leave as Neville worked to free both Ron and the young Delacour.

Harry staggered over the slippery rocks carrying Luna in his arms under a feather-light charm and tried to ignore the cheering of people in the stands. He began shivering in the cold air, and the warm water quickly became icy again causing his limbs to stiffen. As his teeth began to chatter someone took Luna and threw a towel over his shoulders.

"Congradulations, Mr. Potter." Another person clapped him on the back.

"Lady's and Wizards, Neville Longbottom has emerged dragging his – Merlin! He brought up two!"

Harry grinned, and shook his head.

Two down, one to go.

One to survive.

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There were a lot of Slytherins waiting outside the second floor corridor.

Nearly half of the house, in fact.

Harry stopped in his tracks, surprised.

"Harry." Pansy stepped forward. "We... there are a lot of us that need your help."

"Don't forget about us." A group of Ravenclaw students called from a small pocket of blue and black. Harry took a deep breath. A few of the older Slytherins were whispering skeptically to one another.

"There are quite a lot of you, aren't there." Harry murmured. "Well, if you need protection against Voldemort and cannot turn to Dumbledore I will do all I can to help, however, I will need you to sign an agreement, a magically binding contract if you will, if you wish to go any farther." Harry wandlessly conjured a sheet of parchment and a quill and then waved his hand over the page where words appeared in neat script. It was similar to the first contract he had created for the core group, but with a few differences.

Clearing his throat, Harry began to read:

"We who sign this parchment are bound by magic to adhere to the following: the names of the students, excluding Harry Potter, who stand here with hopes for protection or with the intent to join, will not be mentioned with relation to this group to anyone outside the group without first consulting and gaining permission from Harry Potter; and also the location and times of meetings shall not be communicated in any way to any person or magical creature directly or indirectly other than Harry Potter." He looked up from his parchment and held the gaze of a few students. "This is merely the first contract of a set of contracts that you must sign and agree to if you wish to go any farther. Everyone in this hallway must sign this sheet whether or not they wish to continue."

"What happens if we break the contract?" A Slytherin seventh year asked.

"Nothing... violent or permanently maiming. But you can be assured that the moment you break confidence with this contract I will certainly know, and so will the rest of us." Harry grinned evilly, remembering Marietta Edgecombe's face after she had turned traitor and told Umbridge about the DA. It would be something similar, but instead of severe acne, there would be boils and a rash and a babble mouth charm and uncontrollable tremors, and they would last until someone powerful and experienced enough put a stop to it.

It wouldn't be comfortable.

Harry waved his hand, conjuring a table to set the parchment and quill on while the students lined up to sign. Harry studied their faces and committed them to memory. He would need a way to call them

to meetings should they need to assemble, or should they need his presence.

He decided that false sickles would do, because like Hermione said, no one would question a kid carrying around some loose change. He could improve the original design however, so that not only would it have the ability to synchronize days and times for meetings, but also certain groups of select individuals could be called separately, and there could also be a portkey-like device that would allow the students to summon him if they or their family were in immediate danger, and the portkeys would be interconnected, but only to the person holding the master key, which Harry would have. Maybe a magical cloaking device wouldn't be remised either, in case someone had to hide or lose a tracking spell or run from pursuers. And maybe Harry was being overly paranoid.

It would be a complex piece of work, but he could manage.

Once the students had signed Harry took the scroll and placed it into his robe.

"I will to show you the location of our meeting sight, which you will not speak, write, or in any other way communicate to another person outside of this group unless I am inaccessible and it is a life and death situation. Is that clear?" There were nods, "Good, however due to the... sheer number of you, I am going to postpone this meeting until next Sunday. By then I will have written out a second contract for those of you who desire asylum. I want each of you to think about what you are doing, and if you are certain of your choice, I will see you all here at the same time next Sunday."

There was some grumbling, but the students slowly disbanded, heading back to their dormitories. The core group of nine stayed behind.

"You're a regular leader, Potter." Blaise was leaning against the wall, arms folded over his chest.

"Hm." Harry shrugged, mind currently on how he would design the summoning sickle.

"Why do you need to postpone for a week?" Greg asked.

"I have an idea, but it will take quite a bit of complex magic. I'll show you when I finish them."

"Are you sure you're a Hufflepuff? Secrets aren't something you badgers are known for."

"To be honest, I was nearly placed in Slytherin." Harry grinned, "But I begged to be put anywhere else. I was an idiot that let prejudice overrule my rational thought."

"You were eleven, we forgive you." Millicent shrugged.

"That's being very generous, thank you." Sarcasm was hinted in his tone.

"Are we still going to have our meeting?" Vincent asked.

"No." Harry decided. "I think I'll start work on my project. I will see you in class."

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SECRET ORGANIZATION AT HOGWARTS: UNCOVERED!

By: Rita Skeeter.

Late last night there was a secret meeting in the halls of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry Potter, a fourth year student and current Triwizard Champion seems to be the leader of this group, the name of which remains unknown. The purpose of the group according to Mr. Potter is a group that is supposed to provide protection against you-know-who and Albus Dumbledore. I can not help but wonder about the sanity of this young boy who claims to be able to stand against two extremely powerful wizards. How much danger is he spreading by trying to convince our children to believe in his fabrications? What sort of group is he forming? Should we be concerned about Mr. Potter? Will he become the next Dark Lord? All of these questions need to be addressed and it is my hope that soon we will have the answers before it is too late.

Harry's paper incinerated in his hands.

'The nerve of that woman! How on earth did she-,' and then he remembered. Skeeter was an unregistered animagus. She must have been hiding as a little beetle on the wall listening to everything he said. Harry was relieved that he had decided to hold off on the meeting until next week, otherwise the secret about Slytherin's chamber would have made the headlines instead.

He was also lucky that no one else's name had shown up in the paper. Hopefully that would give him time to plan his capture and revenge on the over zealous reporter.

"Are you alright?" Wayne asked? Harry let the ashes of the Prophet fall onto the table.

"Hey Potter, are you really starting a secret group?" A sixth year Hufflepuff joked.

"Yeah, it's called the junior Death Eaters." Another Hufflepuff laughed.

"Can you believe that Potter would make a secret organization?"

"Actually... you saw him face that dragon. Nonverbal and I heard there were anti-summoning charms..."

"Yeah well... Is it true Potter?" They sounded more serious.

"Yes, although it doesn't seem to be much of a secret anymore does it?" Harry sighed and stabbed his breakfast sausage.

"You're serious?"

"It's none of your concern unless you need protection against Voldemort and you don't wish to go to Dumbledore.

"He's bloody serious," said an incredulous voice.

Harry sat brooding about what to do until Albus Dumbledore tapped him on the shoulder.

"I'd like to speak with you in my office."

It was not a request.

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Albus did not offer any lemon drops.

"Please explain to me what you are intending."

"You cannot offer what I can." Harry shrugged. "I do not like the way you use people, and neither do many others. They need someone who can defend them against their families and the Dark Lord, someone who can and will use more than a fidelus charm. I am not amassing an army to take on the Ministry or Death Eaters, or even the Order. I am only offering asylum. Once you kick me to the curb Albus, once I'm expelled, you will have even less power over me than you do now, but I assure you, my power will remain at Hogwarts. You cannot stop me, and neither can Voldemort."

"I could go to the Ministry." Dumbledore leaned back, eyebrows furrowed in deep concentration.

"If they cannot find Voldemort, they will never find me once I'm out of here."

"The members of your group?"

"Are under a magically binding contract, some of them have sworn unbreakable vows. They will not give up their secrets easily. You must also realize that none of these students go to you because they do not trust you or the Ministry to protect them, which you can't."

"And you can?"

"Yes,"

"I fear you are making a terrible mistake,"

"I guess I will simply prove you wrong."

"I cannot allow you to make this group."

"You cannot stop me. Once I complete the third task, and everything happens as it is supposed to, I will leave, but my protection will continue. I will say it again, nothing you can do will stop me."

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Harry had spent the last week working on the fake coins, designing the charms and spells to set into the silver was no easy task and he was only able to do ten a day. If he was correct in assuming that some of the kids would also want protection for their families, he would need to make more very soon, but right now, the forty he completed should be enough for this meeting at least.

And Harry was very excited, because he was going to catch Rita Skeeter. He was going to catch her and then blackmail her, twisting her little beetle arm until she cried uncle.

Several kids sat along the walls in the corridor waiting for him, and Harry rolled his eyes. They honestly had no clue about how to act less suspicious. A few of the Slytherins had cast notice-me-not charms on themselves but with so many people it was a wonder that none of the professors had bothered to come and ask about what was going on.

"So who's the betrayer?" A Ravenclaw sixth year drawled. "Who ratted us out?"

"Yes." Harry hissed, grinning coldly, "Who could it be." The hall became utterly quiet at his words, a nervous shiver passed over them collectively and Harry's grin became wider. "Why, I wonder how it was that Miss Skeeter could have possibly gotten her information. Any ideas?"

"Someone had to have told her."

"Oh no, I don't think so. Every one of you signed my little contract." Harry leaned against the stone wall tilting his head back to look up at the vaulted ceilings. "I would have known about it before that woman's quick-quote quill could have touched parchment." His fingers delicately caressed the wall he was leaning against and whispered, "Close off the corridor please?"

There was a loud scraping noise and both ends of the corridor sealed themselves shut, solid stone blocking the hall. There would be no escape. The students gasped as the windows disappeared into the walls.

"What's going on?"

"We're trapped."

"Come out, come out," Harry said silkily, "where ever you are... little beetle. Little bug on the wall. Let's make a deal, for I have no qualms about scraping beetle guts off of my shoe. Or speaking with the Ministry about a certain unregistered-," There was an angry buzzing in his ear, and with seeker reflexes he swiped the surprised little bug right out of the air, conjured a painted jar and tossed her inside. He was even nice enough to poke tiny holes for oxygen. Then, after casting an unbreakable charm and informing the little beetle about what would happen if she attempted to transform, he then cast a muffling spell that would keep her from hearing the meeting.

There would be a nice long chat with her after the meeting, but for now he had students to reassure.

"In this jar is the culprit. There is no need to worry further about our anonymity. I will do my best to keep you all safe," Harry briefly allowed the students a glance at the jar before he dropped it into the pocket of his robe, "For now, if you will all follow me, we can commence with th-,"

"Who is it?" One of the students interrupted him and was elbowed by a friend.

"That will be kept secret for now," Harry held the kid's gaze, "I am intending to... convince the rat that it would be to its benefit to keep quiet about certain things, you have no need to fear, nor know the identity should things go as planned." When nothing further was said Harry silently gestured the students to follow him into Myrtles bathroom and into the chamber of secrets.

XXXXX

"Wow!" A seventh year Slytherin gasped next to Harry as the others filed into the chamber. Harry had spelled them free of slime, and wondered if there was a cleaner way to enter the Chamber of secrets. For now he would have to levitate them out, and that was bound to be annoyingly slow. Perhaps he should construct a staircase?

"So it really does exist," whispered a Ravenclaw. "How'd you find it Potter?"

"That's my secret to keep." Harry twirled his finger in a lazy manner, conjuring several beanbag chairs and arranged them in a semi-circle. "Everyone can take a seat."

"So casual, Potter," Pansy grinned.

"I figured everyone might appreciate the comfort." He shrugged then dropped the bag he was holding. Out of it spilled several silver sickles. "These are going to be the most important tool you will have."

"Money?" Asked a Dean, "Seriously?"

"Don't be a moron, Gryffindork," Draco sneered.

"Draco." Harry flicked a finger and the blond boy was promptly silenced. "Now, to explain. As I was saying, these fake sickles are going to be a very important tool. Each one of you will be given a sickle. They show the dates and times of meetings to the one who owns it. They also serve as an emergency portkey and alerting devise. The portkey will take you directly to the master coin, which I will have on me where ever I go."

"Even in the shower?" Draco asked. Blaise snorted and Pansy giggled behind her hands.

"Yes," Harry rolled his eyes, "I will be available, even when I'm in the middle of a shower, or other embarrassing activities, in the event of an emergency. Also I will be able to portkey to any of your keys should I have need as well. I cannot stress enough when I say that this coin will only work for its blood bound. There is also a cloaking devise that will hide you under something similar to the dissolutionment charm and it will also allow you to throw off most

tracking charms. These features can only protect you, not your family or your friends. It will only work for the one it is blood bonded to. If you'd like one for siblings or parents, talk to me and I will see what I can arrange."

"Those can't be legal."

"They are not. And you may not under any circumstances reveal their true purpose to anyone that has not signed a contract with me. If you decide to abuse the power and responsibility I am gifting you, rest assured punishment will be swift and harsh. You will not receive many second chances with me. Am I clear?"

The small assembly nodded solemnly, and generally satisfied, Harry set up a small desk, took a seat and held up another contract.

"I know you all must be getting sick of signing your name, but if you want a summoning sickle, it is required. Please form a line."

XXXXX

"Now then. Skeeter. I propose a deal..." Harry said calmly. The woman sat petrified in her chair, unable to do more than blink.

XXXXX

There were no more articles from Rita about a secret group of students and it had quietly fallen into the background as a silly rumor. Instead, Rita focused on the other champions, completely avoiding the subject of Harry Potter.

The only obstacle left was the result of the third task, and Harry was already planning how he might interfere or influence the outcome.

So far no one had attempted to use their summoning sickle for inappropriate activities such as port-keying into his shower stall, nor had anyone summoned him to their location. Harry had been adamant that everyone knew how to use their keys and assured everyone that if they had any questions about its uses they could always approach him.

Three of the students had requested summoning sickles for their family members, although said family members had yet to know

about it. Harry planned to have the members visit their family for a few hours on the weekend where he would port-key using the sickle and explain everything once there. The only thing he was worried about was not being taken seriously.

Everything would be arranged by next weekend.

For now it was Monday and he had Herbology with the Gryfindors.

XXXXX

Hermione did not speak to him while they worked on their plant assignment. This particular assignment was rather difficult only in that students were asked to find a way to prune back a nine headed hydrangea – not the muggle kind. It was a magical plant that mimicked the legendary Hydra monster that grew three heads each time one was cut off. It was a nasty plant that liked to live on the edges of swamps. It was carnivorous and usually ate insects and small rodents.

Professor sprout warned the class not to simply cut them back or the hydrangea would grow too large and could possibly harm a student.

Hermione had, of course, already researched the hydrangea and knew the correct way to prune the nine heads down to six. Harry watched in silence as Hermione pruned three of the menacing looking flowers.

"Anyone who had read the chapter thoroughly would know how to cut back these plants," Wayne whined at his partner, Ron, who had succeeded in creating an eighteen headed hydrangea. "See, like this..."

Harry let his eyes wander over to Neville who had finished even before Hermione.

"Harry," she set her wand on the lab table and turned to face him, "That article about the... well, you know. How is it... I mean..."

"It is progressing well." Harry shrugged and poked one of the flowers which snapped at him reflexively. He grinned.

"Oh... that's good I suppose."

"Hm." Harry agreed.

"Is there... is there anything I can do to help."

Harry looked at her carefully, her honest eyes were eager to be helpful. Harry seriously considered what the girl could do for him and then a flash of inspiration hit him.

"You know... there is something..."

"What is it?"

"And it would be of great help to Neville and even Dumbledore."

"I thought you were against him." She asked suspiciously.

"Not against him, I simply do not agree with him on some things."

"How will it help him?"

"By hindering Neville's greatest enemy." Hermione's eyes went wide, "Meet me in the room of requirement after dinner. And you can bring Ron and Neville. They can help too."

She nodded her understanding.

XXXXX

Dinner that night was weird. Half of the Slytherins nodded to him as he sat down to eat with Draco and the rest of his cohorts. Just as he took his seat, Terry Boot tapped him on the shoulder.

"There is someone that wants to meet you later." He said quietly.

"Take him to moaning Myrtle's toilet about an hour after dinner. Is that okay?" Harry asked. Terry nodded and smiled.

"Thanks Harry." He said and then left.

"Thanks Harry," Draco gushed mockingly.

"You're just annoyed that he's getting more attention than you." Millicent observed with a small smirk.

"I am not!"

Again Harry was tapped on the shoulder. Turning, he saw Luna staring at him with wide eyes, smiling like Christmas had come again.

"Luna." Harry smiled, "What can I do for you?"

"You said you'd like another necklace, so I made one. It was really hard to find the right things to string together, but this one should work much better as keeping wackspurts away and you might get to see more snow people, or even the mud people. I'll have to take the other one back though." Luna rambled.

"Oh... thanks Luna." Harry quickly struggled to pull the first necklace off handing it back to her. He was surprised when she began to pull a very long cord out of her pocket. Attached to it were animal fangs, feathers, strange coins, and small carved wooden beads. Compared to the last one, it looked as though it had a pattern to it. The cord was black and all of the feathers were a beautiful green color. The tips of the fangs were painted red, yellow, or blue.

Once the entire length was pulled from her bag, Luna took it upon herself to arrange it around his neck, coiling it loosely until it was settled to her satisfaction. Harry immediately felt something stir inside him as Luna took her hands away.

"T-thanks I-," Harry's fingers curled voluntarily and he felt the room temperature rise slightly. "I really appreciate it." Luna smiled and then left.

"My, you certainly are popular." Blaise grinned at the necklace.

"At least it doesn't clash as bad as the other one you had," Pansy snorted.

"You're only jealous she hasn't made one for you," Harry paused, "...yet."

XXXXX

After dinner Harry made his way to the room of requirement trying to figure out how he should explain things to the trio.

When he walked in he found the three Gryffindors comfortably seated in three comfortable arm chairs munching on a plate of biscuits.

"All made your selves at home then?" Harry joked and took a seat in a similar arm chair that appeared in the room as he closed the door.

"Want a biscuit?" Ron offered with his mouth full.

"No thanks."

"So I explained to Ron and Neville about... about wanting to help you." Hermione frowned a little and Harry smirked, knowing that Hermione was unable to tell them much because of the contract she had signed.

"How much do you know about Voldemort?" Ron and Hermione flinched, "About why he can keep coming back, even after he has supposedly died?"

"He's evil?" Ron supplied.

"Not human?" Neville guessed.

"Well, barely human anyway." Harry waved a hand dismissively. "The problem lies in his excessive and dangerous use of dark magic. He has essentially severed his soul into seven pieces and locked those pieces away into different objects. One of those objects is in a desk drawer at Grimmauld Place.

The trio blanched when Harry mentioned the Black's ancestral home and the secret meeting place of the Order of the Phoenix.

"There is a locket, Slytherin's locket, with an 'S' on the front. I believe it is in the desk in Regulus's old room. Don't touch it. Wrap it in something and bring it to me and I will destroy it, in front of you if you'd like, so you know I am speaking the truth. There are six others that need to be destroyed. Can you do this for me?"

Hermione and Ron looked at Neville.

"How do you know about Grimmauld Place?"

"Lot's of people know about it, Neville." Harry smirked, "

If you cannot grab it yourselves, write to your... write to Sirius and have him send it by owl... though it would be safer in the hands of a wizard.

"I think you're barmy." Ron said half-seriously.

"It's possible. But more importantly, do not speak of this to anyone outside this room. If you are concerned I suppose it is alright to speak to Dumbledore, but keep this from the rest of the students and staff."

The three Gryffindors nodded and looked grimly determined.

"I'll get the locket for you," Neville declared.

"There is another Horcrux in this room," Harry said suddenly. "Ravenclaw's diadem. I can show you what they feel like and... here, we need to leave the room for a moment.

Once outside, the door vanished and Harry walked back and forth thinking resolutely of a place to hide. After his third pass of the blank wall he wrenched open the door and looked upon a room full of scattered gadgets, strange patterned furniture, and hundreds of scrolls that likely stored a wealth of information. Harry glanced about for a moment before his eyes settled where the tiara had long since been hidden.

"This," Harry held the crown aloft, "is Ravenclaw's diadem."

"How do you destroy it?" Hermione asked.

"I doubt I would need it, but you can use Gryffindor's sword. It is coated with Basilisk venom."

"I see, so it can only be destroyed by some thing magically destructive." Hermione nodded. "Then if one is Slytherin's locket and this one is Ravenclaw's, which I hope you know has been lost for

centuries, I'm not even going to bother asking how you knew where to find it, then that means you-know-who's probably got something from Hufflepuff and Gryffindor."

"Well, Hufflepuff anyway," Harry shrugged, agreeing. "The diary, Tom's diary was also a horcrux. So really that left six and soon only five once I'm through with this one."

"So you want us to find the... the horcruxes and destroy them?"

"Just the locket for now," Harry grinned at there willingness to delve into something so dangerous, "The other's are a bit more challenging to get to."

"We can do that." Hermione said suddenly, "I want to... We want to help."

'Typical Gryffindors,' He thought fondly.

XXXXX

Harry curled himself into a tight ball, shivering against the stone floor of the Chamber of Secrets. A body stood over him, hands on naked hips, dark hair and deep green eyes. It was not a girl, not a boy, but another manifestation of the elements. He knew it was the earth element, he could feel that much, but he was too cold and worn to look any closer.

"I wonder how you stand to endure such a limited form." It said quietly. Harry shuddered in response, surprised he could move at all. "Wind comes as well, though we will wait for you to recover a moment."

"W-why..." Harry tried to ask why they were doing this to him. Why they kept pushing and pulling at his magic.

"We are strengthening and stretching your capacity." A gust of wind tore through the chamber and the wind element appeared as the earth said it would. Harry could no longer shiver, and he was so very cold. He could hardly breathe. "Oh dear, perhaps I should have waited a moment longer." It didn't sound very apologetic or concerned.

"It matters little. The charm helps." Earth bent down to run two fingers over one of the feathers attached to the necklace Luna gave him. It laughed warmly. "It was beautifully made."

"The boy no longer moves." Wind said.

"The boy will move." Earth argued.

"Move." Wind ordered. Harry closed his eyes. He didn't really want to move. He felt so tired, and cold, and he really just wanted to sleep, but the words he heard echoed through him like a mantra. He was able to push his arm an inch away.

"Move." Earth repeated the order. Harry weakly turned his eyes pleadingly to the human shaped elements.

"Trying." Harry breathed out the word. "Cold... tired... trying..."

"Enough." Harry heard another voice but his mind felt muddled and did not know if it was Earth or Wind, or anyone at all.

"Enough," Agreed a chorus of voices, too many to count.

He fainted.

XXXXX

The end of May.

It was the end of May, and Harry had about two weeks before the third task. He was nervous. Not about the maze. He was hardly worried over something so seemingly trivial. He was worried about his magic. Two at once. Two of the elements had created a human manifestation and they had been completely different than Water.

Two of them had stood before him, while he lay shivering and in pain on the stone floor of the chamber. They were pushing him to his limits and perhaps it was working, for he was able to move this time, though barely, and then he hadn't been able to fathom not moving when they had ordered him. He had needed to move, despite the cold and the pain and the exhaustion.

That he couldn't disobey was beginning to frighten him.

But then... he thought it didn't matter. It hurt to be tugged around when ever they pleased, like he had no thought of his own, no will of his own.

No will of his own...

He really didn't belong to himself anymore.

He hadn't expected to live.

Would he have made this choice again if he knew he would live through the final battle against Voldemort? Would he have so recklessly sold himself to magic?

'Would you?'

Yes he thought.

Yes, because despite giving up a life all his own, he had gained an incredible experience and a closer relationship with the magic that fueled this society. He gained the power to defeat a great dark wizard and hold his own against the Headmaster. He was able to protect his friends and family and if the magic would give him the strength, then he would have made the same choice again and again.

His magic, no not his, but magic it was, curled around him in something like an embrace.

'Soon, child, soon you will witness all of us and then All of us, because you wished it so.'

Chapter 15: The Third Task and Voldemort's Return.

Today was going to be busy.

The third task happened today. The Boy-who-lived would be port-keyed out of Hogwarts grounds to a graveyard today. The Dark Lord would be resurrected today. Wormtail would lose his hand today.

But most importantly, Cedric was not going to die today.

Harry was determined to save as many people as he could, to right all the wrongs he had created his first time around. He was determined that this time it would be different.

In a way he felt it was pointless, or well, not pointless, but perhaps hopeless, because he knew he wasn't really fixing his old mistakes. This was a different world. His Cedric died, his Sirius died, his Dumbledore died. These were different people, similar, but different, and he would save them, because he had the power to save them, but it wouldn't redeem him. It wouldn't erase his mistakes.

But he would save them, because they were people with hopes and dreams, because they could be saved, and... because despite their being different, he still loved them because they represented the memories of the people he held dear.

Neville sat at the Gryffindor table, looking nervous and not eating. Harry gave him a reassuring smile when he caught the boy's gaze. The boy-who-lived swallowed and grimaced before his attention was pulled away by Hermione.

Today, Harry sat with the Hufflepuffs, but they didn't speak to him.

He didn't really care.

The Great Hall was buzzing with excitement.

Soon the Third Task would begin.

Harry ate his breakfast quietly.

XXXXX

Harry walked blandly through the maze, green walls towering over him, trying to grab at him, but not viciously. There was no reason to hurry, but also no reason to delay. Neville was being guided, in a way, to the centre through a relatively easy route while Harry let the grabbing plants steer him through. All he worried about was getting to the cup first. But he trusted his magic, and it knew what he wanted.

As he came across an acromantula, he quickly aimed a stunner at one of its eyes and it promptly fell unconscious. There was no reason to kill it, after all. He had also faced a nest of runespoors which he had little trouble in passing as they were mostly arguing among themselves and paid him little mind when he told them he was simply passing through and would not bother them.

A few other things gave him minor difficulty, though he had had the most trouble with the Chimaera. Where ever they had gotten it, the thing had obviously not appreciated being a participant/obstacle in a wizarding competition.

Angry thing...

But so far, nothing had taken him by surprise and he didn't have a scratch on him.

Then, as expected, Krum came crashing through the maze under the imperious curse.

Harry reflexively dodged a stunner and returned the favor. It wasn't even close to a fair fight. As soon as Krum had entered Harry's field of vision the young Quidditch star went down and stayed down. Crouch Jr. via Krum didn't stand a chance.

Casually, Harry took the other boy's wand and cast up red sparks before continuing to the center of the maze.

As he had expected, he reached the cup before anyone else. Carefully, he observed the cup, waiting patiently for this world's boy-who-lived.

Now was a time for choosing.

But should he make the choice? Or should he tell Neville and let him decide.

Harry would have given anything to be told what was going to happen, what could happen, or even the right to know about things concerning him.

Harry sat down in front of the trophy to wait.

Ten minutes or so later, Neville came rushing through a pathway, breathing hard and shaking.

"Harry," Neville panted, "Why are you... just sitting there? Did you win already?"

"You have to take the cup to win." Harry answered.

"Then...?"

"I don't care about winning." Harry shrugged, "But there is another reason I do not wish to take the cup. It is a port-key."

"What?" Neville looked tired and a bit singed, hands on his knees while he caught his breath.

"The cup is a port key that will take a person to a certain graveyard where Voldemort and his servant await the champion, or in other words, the boy-who-lived. Krum was under the imperious curse. He probably already took out Fleur before he came after me. Crouch Jr. really wanted you to win. Too bad I sabotaged his plans. Or well, perhaps I haven't."

"Crouch Jr.?"

"He's a Death Eater. Disguised as Moody," Harry got to his feet and looked Neville in the eye. "I'm going to give you a choice. You can take the cup and go to the graveyard where Voldemort waits to resurrect himself. He will use your blood getting rid of your mother's protection that saved you from him in your first year. This means he will have your blood and consequently make him easy to find when you are ready to face him on your own. Or... I can destroy the port-key and delay his return."

"I have to choose?" Neville asked, "That isn't much of a choice. And what do you think you are joking about?"

"I'm not joking, not about this." Harry hissed, "Now choose, or I will choose for you."

Neville stared at him in shock and then looked to the ground as if in thought.

"Y-you said it would only delay his return if I don't go?"

"He will find a way to come back. You would be sacrificing some of your mother's protection, but he is also sacrificing something, although he doesn't realize it yet. It will be painful."

"How do you know? Is it because you have that group thing that the paper talked about? Or are you trying to set me up? I don't know if I can trust what you say. What if I die? I don't... I don't what to die."

"I... The reason I know these things... I can't tell you why or how I know them. But I know them, and I won't let you die. It will be painful, but I will go with you and I won't, won't, won't let you die."

"If I go, and he comes back... that means more people will be hurt."

"That is inevitable."

"It will hurt?"

"Yes... but I will be there to stop them from taking it too far."

"Who are you? How can you be so sure?"

"I'm just Harry. And you will have to trust me. I am giving you a choice instead of choosing for you. You have to make a decision now, for better or worse."

"If I can... if my blood will help to bring him down in the end... then I'll do it."

"A true Gryffindor's words." Harry said seriously, "Now we will both take the cup on the count of three."

XXXXX

"Kill the spare!" A green bolt of light raced towards Harry, but Harry rolled to one side and stood to face Peter Pettigrew.

"Wormtail." Harry greeted warily. Neville also stood.

"You know him?"

"I know many things... now I suggest you step away from me." Harry stood facing the disgusting figure of Voldemort sitting in a chair by the smoking cauldron big enough for a man to stand in. 'It will have to be.' Harry thought.

"Kill the wretched boy and be done with it." Voldemort hissed from his chair. Neville looked disgusted and was holding a hand to his forehead in pain. Harry certainly didn't miss that part of the connection he had shared with his world's Voldemort.

"Oh Tom, do shut-up. I'm not here to threaten your resurrection. I'm only here to watch."

"Do not Speak that name you filthy mudblood!"

"No need to be making accusations when we are both guilty of such a crime." Harry smiled coldly. "Tell your traitorous servant to take Neville and be done with it. I'd like to watch the show. The time you are wasting is your own."

"Get on with it then, Rat. I wish to speak more to the other boy. Don't muck this up!"

"Y-yes my lord." Peter bowed low and seized Neville, who yelped in surprise. The boy-who-lived had been so busy trying to block out the pain in his head and hadn't been able to tear his eyes away from Voldemort. He began to struggle, but Harry wandlessly cast a petrification spell and Neville went rigid. Neville looked at him with horror and accusation. Harry looked away without emotion.

"You are powerful. A Hufflepuff?" Voldemort's tone had turned sweet and inviting, "I bet you don't get any recognition for your talents, but I can see potential in you and if you joined me you could become great."

"I'm only here to watch. I've no intention of bowing to a hypocrite. Do not mistake me for a groveling lacky. I am not Bella or Lucius. I am not and will never be a Death Eater. But I accept your compliment."

"Wretched mouthed child. If you are here to watch, I suggest you leave before I regain my body, for when that time comes I will certainly kill you."

"For you my Lord!" Peter called, holding a knife to his wrist. Harry swallowed.

There was a piercing scream.

Harry wanted to throw up.

Neville was tied where Harry had been and looked just as disgusted.

Then Voldemort was placed into the cauldron.

That was Harry's cue.

With one hand he canceled the spells holding Neville, his magic eating through the bindings like acid; and then, with nothing more than a thought, his magic pulled at Neville and the cup port-key all of its own, bringing them to Harry's hands.

"NO!" Voldemort cried angrily, "Kill him now! Kill the Potter child! My enemy must not escape!"

And that was all he heard before he closed his hand around Neville's wrist and the other around the triwizard cup before a familiar tug behind his navel signaled the activation of a port-key.

XXXXX

"Tell Dumbledore everything that happened." Harry whispered into Neville's ear. The room was in an uproar.

Moody was trying to make his way over to Neville but Harry stepped in front of him, effectively blocking the Death Eater's path.

"Mr. Potter." the fake Moody said gruffly.

"Mr. Crouch Jr." Harry replied quietly, eyes narrowing. Moody's normal eye widened a fraction.

"You-," He began.

"I will allow you to escape... on the condition you leave Moody's things, including the polyjuice in that flask of yours, and when I am satisfied nothing of his remains on your person, you may flee."

The Death Eater thought it over and then nodded his acceptance.

"Just remember, I could have killed you. I could have handed you over to the aurors where you'd be sent to Azkaban and then given the kiss. I saved you, and you had better remember that."

XXXXX

Harry rescued the real Alastor Moody from the trunk after Crouch Jr. had fled. The poor man had been down there for months, and Harry felt a pang of guilt for knowingly allowing the man to suffer for so long.

Dumbledore had taken it all from there, not daring to glance at Harry through the ordeal. Of course Harry and Neville made the headlines for "winning" the tournament, but nothing was said of Voldemort's return. It seemed as though Dumbledore wished to keep quiet on the issue for the time being so as not to spread panic.

He had alerted the Order and had written to the ministry privately, and Harry agreed with his actions. He and Neville were all but forced to stay in the hospital for a day and a night while they, rather Neville, recovered.

What surprised Harry the most was when the hospital wing was flooded with students from all houses wishing them well and congratulating them for winning the triwizard tournament.

"There will be plenty of time to congratulate them when they are discharged!" Madame Pomfrey forcefully ushered them out.

Dumbledore had come later when most of the chaos had calmed, questioning Harry and Neville about what happened.

"Harry knew!" Neville blurted, "He knew about all of it."

"And I gave you a choice. You suffered minimal pain and we have gained much from it." Harry countered.

"Boys..." The headmaster sighed.

"I'm... I'm not blaming you," Neville shook his head, "But you did know. And I want to know why."

"I can't tell you. Dumbledore knows, but he also knows he ought not to reveal that information either." At Dumbledore's tired nod, Harry continued. "I knew what was planned, not what would happen exactly."

"I still don't know if I made the right choice."

"That remains to be seen." Harry agreed, "But now you have a way to track Voldemort's whereabouts and if you can mark out his bases of operation, you can make small raids into those locations and see if you can discover any patterns until you are ready to face him."

"You have given us valuable information, and for that I thank you. However, you are too young to-," Dumbledore started in but Harry quickly interrupted.

"Save it, old man."

Neville's jaw dropped in shock.

XXXXX

Harry sat across from Dumbledore. This time he was alone, and Harry thought he knew what was coming.

His expulsion.

"I am at a loss." Dumbledore looked perplexed. "I can not decide what to do with you. I have not yet found a way for you to return to your dimension, and no doubt you haven't had much time to make any progress towards that research yourself."

"Will you expel me or are you going to keep me around?" Harry asked, trying not to sound too impatient.

"I am uncertain whether it is safer for the students if I keep you here or if you are gone. And I still only have a vague picture of what you actually are. I'm afraid, my boy, that you are a risk to the students if you are unable to control your magic."

"I am no more of a risk than Lockheart or Lupin." Harry countered.

"And that is why I believe I will ask you so accept my apology and return here next term. I believe it is in many of the student's best interests that you remain a student here, and though I do not necessarily condone your actions, I realize that you have more freedom to protect some of the students beyond my reach. I can also see that you are hindering Voldemort and that you are not against the Order."

"I am... glad you aren't going to expel me sir." Harry said carefully.

"Then, that is all Mr. Potter. I hope you can forgive an old man. You are welcome if ever you need assistance."

"Thank you headmaster," Harry stood and bowed to the man. After this year's events, Harry found it difficult to trust the man. He wouldn't trust him with any of his secrets, but he did trust him to act like Dumbledore, after all, that's who he was, and he did respect him... probably. He shrugged. "I'll see you again next school year."

XXXXX

The headmaster had gathered some information together about the orphanage his counterpart had lived in during the summers and had assured him that there would be someone at the station to pick him up.

Sighing, Harry folded the information into his robes and boarded the Hogwarts Express.

He was immediately flanked by Draco and Millicent.

"We've got loads of planning to do this summer."

"Loads," agreed Millicent. Harry sighed in exasperation.

"Where do you go during the summer?" Draco asked.

"An Orphanage," Harry admitted.

"How... depressing." Millicent said sympathetically.

"It'll be fine." Harry shrugged, "Don't worry about it."

XXXXX

"You had better owl us!" Pansy waved goodbye and made her way into the crowd of parents waiting to pick up their children.

Harry spotted Draco's mother who appeared cold to her surroundings as though she were above the other witches and wizards on the platforms, but when Draco came into her sight her eyes warmed and a small smile appeared on her face.

"See you." Draco whispered on his way to her.

"See you." Harry replied.

Millicent touched him briefly on his shoulder and offered a smile. Several others, all members of his odd little group, gave a small acknowledgement. Most were Slytherins and a few came from Ravenclaw.

Lastly Neville Ron and Hermione came to say their farewells.

"I'm... glad you were there with me that night." Neville admitted sheepishly, as though he hadn't already said similar things to him earlier.

"I will always try to help you Neville."

"We want to help too." Hermione interjected hastily. She still stood by her decision, but Harry could see her desire to be involved especially if it helped her friends.

"I'll owl you if I think there is something that you can help with, okay?" He smiled at his old friends, his new friends. Or what ever they were. Memories maybe...

It was the beginning of what was to become a very busy summer, and Harry had too many plans to design and too many people to contact. He just hoped everything would turn out alright, not to mention he had a sneaking suspicion that his magic was going to be tugging him about more than before.

Soon. He thought.

'Soon there will be peace, and I can help make it.'

INTERLUDE: Chapter 16

Barty Crouch Jr.

They knew.

They knew about the secret plan to resurrect the Dark Lord.

They knew, the little bastards, but they didn't know everything.

There was no reason to abort the plan. They only knew the dark lord was coming back, not how or by whom.

They were only kids, and they couldn't do anything to stop him. Even if they did know, their ring leader, that Potter brat, had bound them to secrecy. They couldn't even tell Dumbledore, their friends, or even write to their parents. But how did Potter know? Was he also a legilimens? Had he known from the first day of class?

Even if he was a legilimens, Barty was sure he would have felt the invasion. No, that wasn't it.

Barty Crouch Jr. clenched his fists. He had no way of communicating with the Dark Lord, not under Dumbledore's close scrutiny. He couldn't have risked it.

His plan had almost failed. Neville almost didn't take the port-key, and the Potter boy, the little half-blood Hufflepuff had made it there first. Barty thought for sure his lord would have his head.

But they had gone together. Barty was relieved, certain his master would dispose of both of them, and rise, once again, to take his rightful place as the ruler of the magical world.

Later, he felt the burning on his arm, and saw Snape falter discretely before disappearing from the stands. So he was loyal? Dumbledore also rose from his seat to follow.

Barty didn't like Snape. He hated him for being a spy for the Dark Lord. He was given a title of respect, a cushy job, and students to terrify. Best of all, he didn't need to hide from the Aurors. But, Barty reflected, he had to kiss up to Dumbledore. Spying wasn't all broom sticks and blood lollies.

A bit less than an hour later, to his horror, both Harry and Neville returned to Hogwarts via the port-key. Barty had never felt such a rage. The little brat had escaped again! How?

He had tried to make his way to Longbottom, ready to hurry him to his office to 'escape' the crowd, when really, he was going to-

But the Potter boy intercepted him, caught, and held his attention. One wouldn't have thought much of a scrawny, short, and scruffy looking Hufflepuff, but when their eyes met, it was as if they were the only two in the world. It wasn't just Potter, but Death staring up at him.

Potter said his piece, and Barty got the message loud and clear. He didn't doubt for a minute that everything Potter said was truth.

And he fled.

And the Dark Lord was angry, but not too angry.

And now his Lord wanted to know more about this boy.

He felt hope rise in him; then that hope deflated just as swiftly.

Severus Snape

Harry had assured him that Voldemort would return on the day when they discussed Draco's heritage. Snape hadn't wanted to believe it, but Dumbledore's grave look when he had mentioned the conversation made it a definite possibility. When he looked into some of his student's minds and caught bits and pieces of knowledge about things they had no business knowing, he had no doubt that the Potter brat had been the one to convince his group of followers that the Dark Lord would return. It was a secret that nearly everyone knew.

Not much of a secret, he thought.

How Potter had convinced them, he would never know.

Snape believed Potter when he said the Dark Lord would return, not because he had said it, but for the simple fact that the Dark Lord had

been trying to return and nearly succeeded each time for the last four or five years. He was bound to succeed eventually. But Potter knew. He knew. He probably knew exactly how the Dark Lord would do it too.

Snape wasn't about to rule out any explanations. The boy was a mage; he might also be a seer. Seer's prophecies were notoriously vague, and Harry knew. He knew exactly and planned for these events almost perfectly.

The students... though they knew the Dark Lord would return at the end of the year, they knew nothing more specific. They only feared and waited and put their faith in the young Hufflepuff mage. Their fear was well placed, Snape thought, but he couldn't understand the rational behind their faith.

That Harry had brought them together, his little secret organization of adolescents with fourteen second attention spans and an average IQ of a kneazle, that Harry had managed to cleverly protect and still control them, bind them... it was, Snape had to admit, well thought out.

Everything the boy did was planned.

Harry should have been in Slytherin, not Hufflepuff.

The brat knew.

And Dumbledore... he didn't. He hadn't known a thing. And yet, he did not look too surprised when Snape made to leave. The burning pain in his arm, familiar and dreadful and foreboding, flared to life, and Snape moved as if in a dream. His old master was calling.

He was back, and somehow Snape knew what he had to do, what he had to say.

He would spy again. Because it was the only way he might repent.

It would never end.

This hell.

This constant, unbending hell.

Neville Longbottom

This year had been strange; but what year hadn't been since he started Hogwarts? Again, Neville found himself involved in another one of Voldemort's attempts to kill him, somehow miraculously surviving in the end. So what's new? He'd been through all that before. He was getting sick of it, really.

But backing up, the year had just been plain weird.

And at the center of everything Harry Potter was pulling strings.

Hermione had tried to tell him about Harry's efforts to thwart Voldemort, but she wasn't able to. Literally, she was bound to keep the secret. Even in writing or signing, she couldn't communicate what she knew. It was alarming that a Hufflepuff could do something so Slytherin.

Neville had never liked secrets and his friends were well aware of that fact. Even though Hermione had reassured him that Harry had good reasons, it still bothered him that there were things going on that he wasn't fully aware of. Still, what choice did he have but to go along with what ever Harry was planning? He had other things to worry about after all, like the tournament and trying not to die in said tournament.

In some ways, Harry fascinated him. Before, the Hufflepuff hadn't stood out, and from what he heard, he did poorly in most of his classes. But something had changed, and he was calmer, more confident, and interesting. People were drawn to him, but Neville was verging on entranced.

Yeah, it was weird, but he couldn't help it. He felt nervous when Harry was near, and it was kind of embarrassing. Of all the people Neville had to deal with throughout his life, he had never met anyone like Harry. And there really wasn't anything particularly special about him either except that once you were aware of his presence you couldn't ignore him at all. Harry could remain unnoticed as he liked, sure, but when you actually did notice his existence, or maybe when he let you notice, his presence became impossible to disregard. Neville couldn't really describe exactly why he felt like Harry seemed so different. Maybe it was because he was a mage? Hermione had

mentioned that to him, however Neville only vaguely knew what a mage was, and to him it was just a fairy tale version from one of his grandmother's old story books. And who knew that they still existed? Harry didn't seem like the mages from the story; he didn't seem evil and bent on destroying wizardkind. Neville was pretty sure that there was more to being a mage.

Despite his misgivings about Hermione's forced silence, she had convinced him that it was a good idea to help Harry with the tournament. It was only fair, he thought, to tell Harry the first task was dragons. After all, he would have wanted to know.

But Harry had just laughed at him, like Neville was being silly, because he already knew. There was a moment where he felt almost affronted, but Harry quickly put him at ease, telling him that he would offer his assistance in the second task and that he really did appreciate Neville's concern.

It was also interesting what had happened after. Remus mentioned that Harry had been anxious around Sirius. But how could someone be afraid of dogs when they could care less about facing a dragon?

And Harry had faced his dragon like it was no big deal.

Ron agreed with Neville about Harry being different. Actually, Ron had some serious reservations against him, but Hermione insisted that he was trustworthy. Heck, just the fact that Hermione was so adamant about it probably made Ron distrust Harry on principle.

When Harry had mentioned Grimmauld Place, Neville was taken by surprise. The Order had only just established headquarters last spring when Sirius had gone into hiding.

Neville's Grandmother didn't believe in keeping secrets, despite Dumbledore's futile requests. Alongside the Hogwarts headmaster, she had been one of the driving forces keeping the Order up and running. They didn't meet very often, maybe once a month at someone's house, but when Sirius had offered the use of his ancestral home as headquarters, everyone had agreed.

There was a dining hall big enough for everyone, and it was an old house with many different defenses. Best of all, it was heavily

warded. Heavy enough that even his over-opinionated Grandmother had approved.

That Harry had known about it was a shock. Grimmauld Place was under the Fidelius charm, and Neville knew Harry wasn't part of the order. They didn't accept kids, much to his annoyance. And Ron and Hermione only knew about it because he knew about it, and they only knew because he had insisted that he have no secrets between friends. His Grandmother finally gave in to his demands and eventually arranged for Hermione and Ron to know about Order headquarters.

They took the Order's secrets very seriously. Neither Ron nor Hermione could have told anyone anyway as they were under the charm, but even if they spoke about it to each other it was always when they were sure no one else was around and always in code.

Harry knew a lot of things, Neville decided, and not just about the order.

What was even more surprising than Harry's knowledge about the Order was his knowledge about Voldemort. He knew things about Voldemort that he really shouldn't have known, and that had become even more apparent when Neville found him waiting by the cup.

Harry gave him a choice.

Admittedly, it wasn't much of a choice, and he had nearly lost it when he thought Harry had betrayed him. The way he spoke to Voldemort... Harry wasn't even afraid. In fact, Harry sounded like he had been provoking him. If he hadn't been in such pain at the time, he would have focused more on what was happening, but he did remember seeing Peter cut off his hand.

Neville couldn't believe someone could do something like that.

Then, Harry had taken hold of him while Voldemort was resurrecting in his big bathtub-sized cauldron, and suddenly, they were back at Hogwarts. But it wasn't over yet. After experiencing that whole mess, Harry decided to disappear on him, leaving him to explain to Dumbledore what had happened at the graveyard.

It was a relief that Dumbledore knew why Harry knew a lot of things he shouldn't. He was glad there was a reason for it all, but it irked him a little that neither of them would tell him anything. It had to be important too, if Dumbledore agreed with Harry about keeping it secret.

Neville hated secrets between friends and family. Then again, was Harry really his friend? Sometimes he thought so. Other times he wasn't as sure. Harry was friendly, but he didn't get very close.

He could keep running over the facts he knew in his mind, but the truth was he didn't know enough. The only way he would find out more was if waited until Hermione finally found a damn book on mages or he got closer to Harry. Neither option was looking very promising, but he had the whole summer to try and figure it out. Maybe he'd visit Harry at the orphanage and bring him that locket he said was some dark artifact containing Voldemort's soul.

Neville sighed slowly.

Voldemort

It was annoying that his body was still weak; the muscles in his arms and legs tired more easily than he would have liked. It became that simply standing or doing such a menial task as holding a book would wear him out to the point of exhaustion. He couldn't allow his servants to see him so frail and pathetic. He couldn't afford it.

Luckily his magic was still just as powerful, his mind still as sharp, and his servants just as dim witted.

At least they're influential purebloods, he thought.

Lucius and Severus however, were much more than that. Voldemort had always made a point to favor them because they weren't idiots. Lucius was a coward, but he was wealthy, powerful and very, very influential. Severus was exceedingly skillful, intelligent, and sharp tongued. The man had a verbal knife ready to slash any who sought to dismiss him. No, he wasn't a pureblood, but blood wasn't everything. Voldemort knew that all too well.

Severus was too valuable to lose. It was his potion brewing that had kept him from collapsing every time he walked more than ten paces.

He also had access into Hogwarts, and his spying on Dumbledore was also equally valuable. There were times he wished to be rid of the potions master, for he was often times too intelligent and too knowledgeable, but the cost of losing him was too high.

Bella was loyal. He favored her above all others for her devout loyalty, but she wasn't as useful as her brother in law or the potions master. She had magical prowess, on par with Severus, but she didn't benefit him in political games.

Politics were an annoying thing, especially when things weren't going his way. Voldemort was counting on his followers and their offspring to recreate the former glory of his Death Eaters. Most of his followers were still in Azkaban, among them Bella and her husband. He would have to raid the wizard prison, but that would have to wait until he was physically strong enough.

He had been counting on the Shawn family as new recruits. Voldemort knew they wanted no part in the fighting, and he had assured them that only if it were dire would he call upon them. He was merely in need of support. Although he did put some pressure on their son, a young boy, no more than a few years out of school. The boy seemed reluctant, and so Voldemort did not push too much. He did, of course insist that the boy think carefully about his choice. Voldemort was not a bottomless well of patience.

He had sent out his followers to rally support, but they had little success. Even trying to pressure the families to join the cause didn't work. He couldn't afford to erase anyone yet. There was no need to get Aurors involved this early in the game while he was still so physically unstable. That didn't change the fact that he was angry about the lack of people willing to join him.

They had grown too comfortable with their peace.

Other frustrations included the Potter boy, the young Hufflepuff student that decided to tag along with Longbottom to watch his resurrection and insult him. Had he the strength at the time, he would have tortured the little brat until he was screaming his throat raw.

He had displayed blatant disrespect and nearly spilled a secret that could have ruined him. But he didn't say it aloud, just insinuated that he knew.

When comparing him to the Longbottom child, he felt a near equal sense of fury and hatred. Longbottom had escaped him once again, and this time Potter was to blame.

He toyed with the idea of recruiting him. He was a Hufflepuff after all, and they were notorious for feeling undervalued. But Potter had rejected him without a second thought. Was he taking it from the wrong angle?

Death Eaters had killed his parents, so it was likely he felt resentment towards him. It was a shame really. He could see a natural strength in the boy, a sort of calm power that most would overlook. If only there was a way to persuade him that it hadn't been him that had killed off his family, and he too knew the pain of being unloved and unwanted, having to grow up in an orphanage only to attend a school where no one appreciated his talent.

Perhaps he could forgive the brat if he would bow and beg for forgiveness. He disliked wasting talent after all.

Voldemort didn't know much about the boy yet, but he had a feeling, just a hunch, that he would become quite unpleasantly familiar with him in the near future.

Chapter 17: Summer Begins

Harry sat on his small bed, trying his best to ignore Benjy, Edgar and the rest of the little hellions that inhabited the orphanage. They were terrors, cute, but they were annoying, and ever present in their plotting and excessive energy. Privacy was non-existent, and Harry was continually badgered by the younger children, not all of it nice or innocent. The majority of it was about the tournament and what Hogwarts was like as a fourth year, and it was no less than a miracle if there was even thirty seconds of silence.

Harry was finishing up some much needed research on his animagus 'pet project,' and he thought that he would soon be able to make an attempt at transfiguring him self. However, 'soon' could also mean 'eventually' or 'later' as the case frequently was, and if he kept getting side tracked, he might never know what animal he was. It was a depressing thought.

Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, he was interrupted by Edgar who jumped up on his bed and crawled into his lap.

"Hey Edgar." Harry glanced at the page number of the book before closing it and focusing his attention on the little seven-year-old. It was time to give up on reading for now.

"Hey Harry." Edgar bounced on his knees, "Ms. Drewski says you are helping with dinner tonight. Think you could sneak out some sweets?"

"I think your blood sugar level is quite high enough."

"My what?"

"Never mind. I'm not going to steal food for you. Stealing is against the rules and it's wrong." Harry stuck the book under his bed and cast a sticking charm so no little mischief makers would take it or ruin it as it were.

The first week of orphanage life had been strange and awkward. He had to pretend like he knew everyone, when he certainly had never met any of them before. This made learning names and using them very difficult. He had no idea the other Harry related with others at

the orphanage. He was constantly avoiding using names or titles for fear of slipping up.

One important fact that he had been mortified to discover was that the majority of the witches on staff treated him like a toddler, afraid he might break something or himself at any moment. They, of course, would ask him to do chores out of fairness, but Harry saw the wariness and the nervousness in their eyes when they approached him.

Because Harry had not destroyed anything at all this summer, some of the staff members were beginning to treat him differently. However, there were a few that believed he was simply storing up his bad luck for a momentous occasion where the world would end and the Chudley Cannons win the world cup.

"So... me and Benjy want to make our own Tri-wizard Tournament, and we want you to help." Harry gently prodded Edgar out of his lap before sliding out of bed.

"Your own Tri-wizard Tournament?" Harry slipped on a pair of sandals and walked past a group of boys building a tower out of Mrs. Maryfrets Magi-Stick-Anywhere Blocks, which he had already tripped over on a number of occasions since the first week.

"Yeah, but since we can't get any dragons or lakes, we thought we'd ask you."

"Hm... well, you could have the first task be the task of silence." Harry suggested, "Whoever talks first is the loser."

"That's a good idea – Hey!" Edgar was a sharp little bugger, "I'm serious!"

"So was I..." Harry muttered. Damn.

"Well, if we can't face a dragon, what are we supposed to face?"

"It wasn't about facing a dragon. It was about stealing an egg. And I already told you that stealing is wrong."

"You're brilliant Harry!" Edgar's eyes widened with glee, "We can steal something from Ms. Jemmeson! That'll be like a real task!"

"What? No! I didn't say you should-," Harry stopped when he realized his words were futile. Instead, he ran a hand through his hair and sighed. Ms. Jemmeson was one of the few witches on staff that all but hated children. If anyone could compare to a dragon, it was Ms. Jemmeson.

"And the second task was in the lake right? We have to take back something important right?"

"I think the task was more about learning to adapt to an unfamiliar environment..." Harry ignored the tugging on his t-shirt while side stepping another of the many Magi-Stick Block projects going on in the boy's wing of the orphanage. "The last task was about reacting to different situations, and you had better get a move on kiddo, or I'm going to be partly responsible for helping you make a mess of things."

"Sure, sure," Edgar muttered waving vaguely in his direction. Harry thought he heard the words "unfamiliar" and "girl's wing" before the boy disappeared. He prayed that if they did get in any trouble that they would not try to lay the blame on him.

Yawning quietly, Harry walked into the kitchen, where three women were preparing for dinner.

"Hello, Harry dear. Would you please set out the plates on the counter?"

"Yes ma'am," Harry did his chore without complaint. This was cake compared to the Dursleys.

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Dinner was usually a quiet affair. Most of the kids were too busy stuffing their mouths to cause much chaos, but really, the quiet was due to the regulatory speech or announcement that came before every meal. There was a sort of solemn atmosphere created that no one truly wanted to break. Usually, the speech was about how lucky the children were to have a place to stay, a bed, and regular meals. Most of the children had not gone through the neglect that Harry had in the other world, but each child was acutely aware that they had no mother or father that loved them unconditionally.

Their meals, their clothes, and their beds were gifts that people had given them because the ones who were supposed to give them those things were gone.

Sometimes the speech was happier. For example, there were times when there was good news or if someone was adopted, but most of the time it was the blunt reminder that they were orphans who had no right to complain or feel sorry for themselves, and that, in a way, they owed their appreciation to the staff that took care of them.

Harry was often irritated by that and did his best to ignore what the staff said before dinner despite its relative truth.

Instead, he surveyed the room, noting that Benjy and Edgar were huddled close together, quietly plotting for their tournament.

"Harry, dear." One of the staff women lightly patted him on the shoulder.

"Yes ma'am?" Harry turned to look up at the woman. She was younger, maybe in her early thirties, with dark hair and dark eyes.

"You've been doing very well these past few weeks, and I just want to tell you how impressed I am."

If there was one thing that bothered him about this alternate world, it was that no one seemed to think he could do anything without assistance for fear that an incident would, therefore, shortly and surely befall. People were constantly praising him for not screwing up, and it made him feel like an invalid.

"Thank you, ma'am." Harry smiled all the same and made to return to his plate.

"Thank you, ma'am," an older boy gushed mockingly when the woman left.

Harry had also learned that he was rather unpopular with the older children at the orphanage. He ignored the boy and kept eating.

"Hey Potter, when's the next disaster coming?"

"In a few minutes if you don't shut-up and let me eat in peace." Harry stabbed his fork into a bit of food vigorously.

Normally, Harry wouldn't have reacted, but over the last couple of days, from the moment he "returned" to the orphanage really, some of the older boys had taken it upon themselves to make his life miserable. They had not yet physically accosted him, though from his experience with Dudley, Harry knew it was only a matter of time before they tried.

"Oh, ho." The boy whispered loudly, "Did you actually learn something at your school this year?"

Harry rolled his eyes. Not everyone in the orphanage would attend Hogwarts. The tuition was not exactly cheap, and only the children with a hefty inheritance like Harry or extraordinary ability were accepted at Hogwarts. The remaining students went to a local public institution that only taught the very basics of spell work and most of the spells were household spells or of a vocational nature.

A lot of older students resented Harry, who in their eyes, had little to no magical aptitude and attended Britain's finest school of magic.

"I don't think that's any of your business." Someone from down the table spoke up quietly. Harry glanced up at the unusual defense and blinked when he recognized the face.

"Shut up Ari." The annoying boy growled.

Ari was a Slytherin going into sixth year and was a year "older" than Harry. He had been surprised and a little ashamed that he had not noticed the older boy's existence. Although, he thought, it was probably due to the fact that he had been trying to avoid people lest he make a mistake and give away who he really was.

He also had not spent much time with the older kids, so he was still learning names.

"I'm just saying." Ari shrugged.

"Well, you can stop saying."

"Don't you know he's a Hogwarts Champion?" Ari insisted. Harry frowned resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

"Think I care?"

Harry also recognized Ari as being part of the group he had organized with some of the Slytherins. Fingering the fake coin in his pocket, Harry watched the older boy carefully.

"I think you should." Ari said after a while, "He's... different."

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Harry was certainly used to spending the night in a dormitory with six boys, and he could honestly say that he was indeed capable of sleeping through Ron Weasley's snoring, which is commendable for any human being. However, Harry had never needed to share a bed with two seven year olds.

It seemed like over the course of his stay, Benjy and Edgar had inducted him into becoming their honorary older brother. This apparently meant that both had to cling to him as they slept peacefully. Meanwhile, Harry was forced to endure their drooling and boney limbs.

He half-wished he was callous enough to shove them onto the floor.

But he was a softie for the little terrors, even if Benjy was gnawing on his sleeve.

Sighing, Harry closed his eyes and breathed, trying his best to ignore the smaller bodies with their boney elbows and tiny gripping nails.

"Psst. Harry?" there was a whisper in the dark.

"Hm?" Harry shifted.

"You awake?"

'Well, that was a stupid question,' Harry decided, "Ari?"

"Yeah."

"What is it?"

"I can't sleep."

"That makes two of us, I suppose." Harry stared up at the dark ceiling, trying to make out the strange forms of Magi-Stick Blocks stacked in weird formations on the ceiling. Since the kids couldn't reach the ceiling, it was often that one of the staff would be bothered into retrieving the toys after they were finished trying to make colorful stalactites and upside-down towers.

"Harry?"

"Yes?" Harry rolled his eyes.

"You know those coins you gave us?"

'You mean the secret coins you aren't supposed to talk about?' Harry thought, "yes, what about them?"

Well, can it transport you through wards? I mean... "

"It functions almost the same as a port-key. Some wards can block port-keys if they are specifically designed for that purpose, layered over or under the primary wards, but what I made wasn't quite a port-key. It has a homing sort of purpose that pulls one part to another. I would think that Wards wouldn't matter, although I'm not really an expert..." Harry trailed off, "Still, I don't think wards are an issue."

"I see..." There was another long pause, and yet somehow Harry knew Ari had more than the secret coins on his mind. It was in the tense atmosphere, and Harry could nearly taste the words forming as Ari inhaled to speak again. "Alright, so I can't sleep because my... well, I wouldn't have said anything if I knew you couldn't help." Ari sighed, searching for words, "It's just, I got an owl from a friend, and her older brother has just been given an ultimatum from a... from..."

"Okay," Harry said quickly.

Even if a few of the other boys in the room were not asleep and had been listening to their conversation about port-keys and coins, Harry doubted anyone would think overmuch of it. If Ari had said 'you-know-who' or 'the dark lord,' however, the boys feigning sleep would have been easily able to discern that something suspicious was going on. It wasn't exactly easy to ignore conversations about Britain's current most terrifying wizard.

"Yeah, well, she can't exactly say anything to her brother about the... organization, and she doesn't really know what to do. Do you think you could help her?"

"She has her own coin? Who is it?"

"Yeah, Sera Shawn. She's in my year."

"Why didn't she send me an owl?"

"The note is in code, and only we know the code. She's kind of paranoid like that."

"She also could have summoned me..." Harry yawned and shifted.

"I don't think she's confident that your coin could pull you through the wards. And she also didn't directly ask if you could help. She was asking me what to do... but I don't know what to tell her... I don't think she wants to use an outsider in her family matters, but I really think you'd be a better help than me."

"How soon does this need to be taken care of? When is the ultimatum up?"

"He has until the end of the week to prepare to join or die."

"Tch, he's as dramatic as ever," Harry rolled his eyes, "Okay. I'll pay a visit to her tomorrow. Will that be alright?"

"Yeah, thanks." Ari sounded relieved. "Night."

"Night," Harry returned and continued to stare up at the ceiling thinking about what he had to do in the morning to prepare.

Edgar's knee dug into his thigh. He winced.

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Harry sent a short message to Sera Shawn's coin saying he was going to give her three minutes before he'd port-key in to see her. She sent no reply, so he assumed that it was okay.

The problem was that it wasn't okay at all.

He ended up in a very ornate bathroom next to a small pile of clothes.

The shower was running, and Harry knew he was probably going to scare her. First, he needed to cast a silencing charm on the door, just in case she screamed. He wasn't about to deal with Sera's parents if he didn't have to. Secondly, he cast a stronger locking charm to reinforce the door.

He counted himself lucky that he had appeared in a bathroom and not in a room occupied by any pseudo Death Eaters. The Shawns were supporters of the Dark Lord and would have probably needed to be forced into unconsciousness before he could hold a civil conversation with their daughter. Luckily, no violence or memory charms would have to be used.

The wards allowed him through without much fuss as their nature was, for the larger part, intent focused. Now he just had to get Sera's attention before her dignity was compromised.

"Sera?" Harry called loud enough to be heard over the running water. There was a yelp, and a curse as something dropped to the floor.

"W-who's there?" the girl peeked out from the curtain, and Harry turned to look at the side wall so he wasn't looking directly at her. "Harry? What are you doing in my bathroom, you perv?" she hissed.

"Ari says hi." Harry snorted, trying not to laugh at his ridiculous luck.

"So he did decide to tell you..." she disappeared behind the shower curtain and turned off the water. "Turn all the way around. I'm going to get dressed. Did you put up a silencing spell? The house is warded so you can use magic without being... oh wait, what am I saying? You can do wandless magic right?"

"Already taken care of." Harry turned fully around to face the door. There was rustling and grunting for a minute as Sera struggled into her clothes.

"Did he explain the week time period? Can you get him a coin?" She seemed stressed.

"Breathe. I brought everything he will need, and if I am missing something, I can easily retrieve it. Now, is there anyway I can speak with him?"

"Oh Harry, thank you so much." Tears were sliding down her cheeks. "I don't know what to do. And Alex is so stubborn, he thinks no one can help him, and Mum and Dad are pressuring him. They're such hypocrites; they think it's an honor, yet they don't offer their own service. Merlin, I hate them sometimes."

"It's okay. I'll take care of it." Harry sighed. The week looked like it was going to be a little dangerous. He'd have to find a way to make sure Sera's older brother wasn't inducted into the ranks of the death eaters. There was a choice to be made, and Harry hated forcing people to choose. He wasn't going to be like Dumbledore and choose for them, but he wasn't going to let them waste time deliberating either.

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Harry had a headache.

He had met with Alex and had given him a list of options. Harry wasn't one to sugarcoat things and spared Sera's bother nothing. At first Alex was skeptical, as Harry had been expecting, but once Harry got in on all the gory details of what being Voldemort's lackey entailed... well, at any rate, Alex Shawn would not be participating in any future death eater activities by choice. He didn't have the stomach for it.

The idea they came up with was to make up a "job offer" to get Alex out of the country for awhile. He didn't have any decent options as it were, and he couldn't count on friends or family to be able to shield him. His only options were to join or run, and of course, he chose to run. He had an interest in herbology, which gave Harry the idea to

send him to Australia. It was far away enough that Voldemort wouldn't bother looking for him, and though Alex wasn't enthusiastic about the idea, muggle transport would get him there. Once in Australia, he would need to find a job and a place to stay. He had a little bit of money in his savings account at the bank that he could withdraw in a hurry and it would last for maybe a year and a half, more if he was frugal. Hopefully, by then Harry would be sending him funds to support him with what he was planning, but until such a time, Harry encouraged him to find employment so he would have a source of income to buffer the cost.

This reminded him to pay a visit to the bank to see what he could do about money.

After giving Alex his coin, Harry suggested that when he made it to Australia he should contact him through muggle post to communicate his situation, where he was staying, if he had a stable income, etc. This meant he needed to set up a P.O. box, but he could do that later. Harry wanted to keep tabs on him, as he was certain that there would be more people who needed to run from the Dark Lord.

"I'd like you to set up," Harry paused looking for the right word, "a base of operations in a far away place. I'd like to be able to send other people to Australia via this port-key system," Harry held up the false sickle. "In case there are other people who need an out, a place to run. If you can do this, you can help other people who are in your situation. Would you be willing? It'll be hard, but once I find a way to get funds, I can send you some money. I'll give you another coin. This one needs to be active when you find a place to stay. Put it in an open room, like a sitting room so I can port-key people back and forth." Harry pulled out a Galleon and set it on the table next to the sickle.

"I don't even understand muggle post." Alex looked confused but determined.

"I will explain what you need to know, and I'll write out some instructions on how to deal with muggles. You'll probably need a pocket dictionary too, so you know what certain appliances are." Harry sighed. At least Alex was a quick learner and appeared to adapt well.

His biggest concern was the distance and whether his Galleon coin would be able to bridge a connection from England to Australia. He was pretty certain it would work. The magic he used seemed pretty confident that it would work, but it was always a good idea to test it out. That would have to wait until he heard from Alex though.

When Harry arrived back at the orphanage dinner was being served. Several of the staff eyed him suspiciously, probably wondering where he had been. Despite not having any chores or other duties, the staff were in the habit of watching out for him in case any accidents occurred, so they could hopefully be lessened by their presence.

"And where were you all day?" One of the staff walked up to him before he could take a seat.

"Out," Harry shrugged.

"Don't be smart with me, boy, or I'll be taking you to see Ms. Jemmeson." She hissed. Harry said nothing and stared at her, waiting for direction. "Well?"

"Well, what?" He asked. My, but wasn't she pissy. Either she was having the worst day of her life, or she was one of those people who were just angry at the world.

"Tell me where you were." She had her hands on her hips. Harry found that he didn't like this particular staff member very much.

"That information is classified." He grinned challengingly. That seemed to be the last straw, and he watched the anger in her features flare and narrow on him.

"Fine, you can miss dinner and speak with Ms. Jemmeson in her office." She spat, gripping his arm tightly and tugging roughly at the limb.

Of its own accord, Harry's magic took hold and twisted the woman's arm, peeling it away from his person in an instant. The woman screamed as her arm snapped like a twig, once, then twice in deliberate and painful slowness.

Harry staggered back in horror as his magic overzealously defended him.

"Stop!" Harry cried, "Please stop it!" and quite suddenly, the swell of threatening power snuffed out as though it had not been intent to tear the appendages from anything that considered approaching him.

He shivered, standing witness to the terrifying act his magic had performed. The staff woman whimpered while the room remained silent otherwise. The rest of the staff and children had stopped eating to gape in fright at him.

And Merlin, he felt like a demon.

No one moved for a solid minute, so eventually, Harry carefully approached the woman who had tried to accost him.

"I think you need to see a healer. I'll take you to St. Mungo's. Is that alright?"

"S-stay away from me!" the woman shrieked with wide eyes.

"Harry..." another staff member cautiously approached him, a young man.

"Will you please take her to the hospital? I don't think she will go with me." Harry stepped away, allowing the man to help the other woman out of the room. With a big sigh, Harry looked up and met the gaze of the staff and children who remained.

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It was a wonder that he had not been kicked out of the orphanage. Luck was with him when Madame Jemmeson quickly took him aside into her office to "discuss what happened."

This did not mean Harry was given the opportunity to speak, however, as it was always like this whenever Jemmeson inflicted her overbearing personality on anyone.

Madame Jemmeson had decided on her own that Harry had felt threatened and accidentally broke the staff woman's arm. She had not been present; therefore, she decided to take the facts and form

her own fiction of what happened. She obviously was of the opinion that Harry Potter couldn't have possibly intended the woman to suffer, and because of his reputation for poor magical control, the incident was blamed on accidental magic, despite his being nearly fifteen.

In a way, Harry was glad that he could keep the fact that he was a mage secret for a bit longer. For those who knew what a mage really was, well, their reception of him had never been very welcome.

When Harry was returned to the boy's wing, he allowed himself to collapse into his bed. But just as he was beginning to dose off...

"Harry?"

He felt a small tug on his sheets.

"Hm?" He closed his eyes, wishing for a full stomach and some peace and quiet, neither of which would be granted to him anytime soon.

"Madame Lorand said we shouldn't bother you, but we can't sleep..."

"So you completely disregard her warning." Harry smirked despite himself.

"Please Harry?" Benjy's voice whined in the dark.

Sighing, Harry pulled back his covers and waited as the boys happily scrambled in next to him. A familiar elbow found his ribs, and there was more jabbing of body parts here and there while the boys settled into a comfortable position on the small bed.

"Why?" Harry wondered aloud. Why did his magic cause so much harm?

"We know you're strong." Benjy whispered.

"We know you'll protect us," added Edgar. "You won't die and leave us in this place."

"This place isn't so awful." Harry argued quietly. "Even if those announcements before dinner are depressing and annoying, you are both very lucky that you have a roof and a bed, even if you are sharing mine, and you both get regular meals, which is more than many children can say."

"So it's true then?"

"If I weren't at the orphanage, I'd be placed with my muggle aunt and uncle. What if they hated wizards and hated me, and I was forced to live with two people that would lock me up because they feared what I might become? What if they starved me and punished me for things I couldn't control? Lot's of kids have difficult family situations, and here it's safe. This place may not provide the love and warmth of a mother or father, but the other kids are like your brothers and sisters, and the staff are like... a stand in I guess, but they're still part of this really big family we have."

There were soft snores coming from the little boys.

Harry rolled his eyes.

"It would be a shame for you to take this place for granted." He muttered and prepared himself for another restless night.

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A week had gone by, and Harry had received an owl from Pansy updating him on some ministry activities, not that he read through them thoroughly or particularly cared, but she seemed to think it was important. Harry had also received an owl from Sera.

Her letter had been brief, stating that her parents had been able to talk their way out of handing their son over to Voldemort's service without suffering any irreparable damage. He was currently 'abroad in Australia' studying for some unknown occupation, so the story went. Voldemort had not been pleased, but the Shawns had twisted the story to make it sound like they had not approved of his sudden decision to leave. They promised to keep trying to convince him to return, offering hopes and shallow promises to appease the Dark Lord in any way they could.

Harry was relieved that his plan had worked.

The staff woman he had hurt was out of the hospital but had quit working at the orphanage. No one grabbed him or even touched him anymore, except for Edgar and Benjy. Even the older boys, who had been on his case earlier, left him alone. They blamed the Hogwarts Tournament as the reason for his sudden jumpiness.

Despite Madame Jemmeson's insistence that he had performed accidental magic, she had not actually witnessed the deliberateness of Harry's magic as it snapped the woman's arm. Twice.

The other staff members had, and they were more than a little wary. Whenever a staff member asked him to complete his chores, he or she did so from behind a door or from several feet away.

Harry felt awful about it, but he didn't say anything.

People stayed well clear of him, and he was gaining a rather fearsome reputation.

At least they didn't hover over him anymore, waiting for him to destroy something. But Harry didn't like the fact that they feared him. No one wanted to sit by him at meals save his seven-year-old tag-alongs and Ari.

On the bright side, he now had a lot of time to read or study, and the other kids were quieter when he was around or moved somewhere else.

He was a little lonely, but there were too many things to do, and he didn't like dwelling on things he couldn't change.

Harry was finally ready to begin his animagus transformation. But the book insisted that someone he trusted should be standing by in case the transformation went awry or if he got stuck in his animal form. It looked like he would be waiting for a little longer.

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Harry decided to spend more time outside. It was more comfortable and less distracting when there weren't so many people milling about and whispering to each other as though they were afraid he'd hear.

Outside, he had discovered a nice secluded area with decent tree cover and soft grass to lie on while he spent time meditating on his animagus form. Here, he could curl up into a ball and listen to birds calling and wind rushing over the ground while he napped in the sun.

There were several gardens surrounding St. Mungos that were full of different sorts of medical herbs and plants that could be used in healing potions. The place Harry had found was part of one such garden, but the garden was of the sort that required a lot of shade, and he was more than happy to lie on the other side of the line of trees, nicely hidden from view.

Today was a beautiful day, and the wind seemed to be in a blustery mood, playing with his hair and curling over him at different speeds. Smiling to himself, he continued to ponder about his animal form. What would he be?

A mammal? A bird?

Would he be a reptile, something cold blooded?

He sincerely hoped he was not something amphibious or water bound. He really only wanted to discover his animal form and see if it could be a useful tool. He wasn't certain how useful a toad or a fish would be.

What color? What shape? What size?

Chapter 18: Disillusioned

The orphanage staff members were beginning to ignore his comings and goings. He could be gone for several hours napping in the gardens, and no one would bother to ask where he had been.

Benji and Edgar had occasionally made an attempt to distract him while he studied human transfiguration before evening meals in the lounge area, but after a stern word, they got huffy with him and played by themselves.

Even though they were mad at him at first and made a futile effort to prank him, they forgave him after a few hours, and Harry still found himself with two extra bed mates and several bony limbs digging into his sides.

Because he knew no one would miss him, he thought today would be a good day to find out exactly where the Gaunt cottage was.

The Gaunts had been purebloods, and Harry knew the cottage was somewhere near the graveyard. From only the pensive memory, Harry thought he could probably find its location.

He needed to find the ring, and the cottage was a good place to start looking. In fact, he was almost certain it was there.

If he could destroy that horcrux, then there would be only four left. And then, if Neville, Ron and Hermione could get him the locket that would leave three. Nagini, the cup, and one other... but that one had been destroyed by accident.

Harry hadn't been aware of the fact that he was also a horcrux until he allied himself with magic. Becoming a mage had required him to give a portion of his magic away to a greater magic, and in doing that, he discovered the horcrux that was lying dormant inside him.

His will was strong, but had it remained within him, the piece of Tom Riddle's soul might have ended up possessing his mind and body. It came as a surprise when he felt pieces of the broken soul being torn out of him like a thistle being pulled from the ground. It was uncomfortable at first, but as the tugging grew more insistent, it became unbearable. He thought he was going to die as the horcrux was uprooted up by magic and swallowed up like a sacrifice.

Harry had regained consciousness several hours later, and it was the first time in his memory that he could feel Magic's will, its power, and weight pressing into him and out of him and around him and through him. He was aware of its currents and that it had a mind of its own.

The terrifying realization that within him had been a piece of Voldemort's soul seemed so insignificant at the time. He hadn't really thought about it after the fact, because he had been so preoccupied with trying to understand his new relationship with Magic. But the significance was important now, because if there had been a horcrux within him, there was probably one inside Neville.

When he had faced Voldemort for the very last time, there had been nothing left containing his soul save for his own vessel. Nagini was the last horcrux Harry destroyed, and it was upon the snake's demise that Voldemort knew what Harry and the Order were up to.

If Neville also had a horcrux within him, it was going to be tricky trying to get it out. There had to be a way to pull out the horcrux without killing him.

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Harry stood at the sight of Voldemort's resurrection. Gravestones dotted the cemetery, from large marble statues to crosses and moss covered markers that likely held a name to them on their covered faces. Harry glanced about him in the daylight. Somehow sunlight made the graveyard look innocent and peaceful, as if the night of dark and dubious acts had never occurred.

His magic, like a snake, coiled itself in displeasure. It held a dispassionate hate for the dark wizards that congregated here. Such wizards held such erroneous respect for magic, abused it, and sought to master its nature. But worse yet was their master, who had twisted a part of magic into such darkness, like a disease, a festering wound seven times that would need amputation or cleansing to release the wretched pulling and confining laws. There was no doubt that Magic would take great satisfaction in striking him down a second time, but there was a different law binding magic from direct and swift punishment. Prophecy held magic back, and it would hold until one of two perished.

Yew trees grew along the edges of the grave yard, and up and to the east, Harry could see a small church, all but falling to pieces. Beyond that was a small muggle town, barely ten shops with one main street that ran twisting through the center. To the north were houses belonging to one of several neighborhoods that likely spotted the general area. Their old stone walls stood shaded in several rows of large, scraggly, moss covered trees.

Slithering past his feet, a garden snake escaped from being trodden over. Then, Harry glanced to the south and felt a set of heavy wards and if he wasn't mistaken, a rather powerful muggle repellent charm.

The trees and brush looked a bit larger and fuller than in the memory, but Harry thought the hill to the south looked familiar, or at least promising.

Without pause, he began to walk through the graveyard and crossed over a few smaller hills. Eventually, he came upon a small path that no doubt led further into the wooded area. Continuing up a steep hill, he discovered the remains of a very old cottage.

As he walked on, the surrounding wards dragged at him, hindering his pace. They couldn't completely impede him however, until he came to the very last set. Upon the open entryway and the full perimeter of the old house was a set of wards that forced him to a halt. The door, or rather what had been the door, had fallen into the wretched looking shack. The rotted wood had given into age and weather, and the hinges were tarnished with rust. But even though the door had fallen in, for Harry, the entryway was impenetrable and was little more than a see-through barrier.

Voldemort had obviously not cared about the upkeep of the place, for there were no preserving charms at all about the rotting and insect infested property. He had cast his ward upon the idea of an entryway rather than the actual door.

This meant the wards were anchored to something else.

Harry glanced around thoughtfully.

"If only I knew a bit more about wards." Harry muttered. He knew a lot of general things, but the true casting of wards was learned in

ancient runes and arithmancy in seventh year, both of which he forwent, choosing instead to take easier classes. Anything he learned about wards had been after graduation while he was out destroying horcruxes with Ron and Hermione. In fact, Hermione would probably know more about this than he did because she had taken ancient runes. But that was in a different world.

Ruefully, Harry thought he should have asked Bill for help, but then decided against it. He really didn't know the Weasley family all that well in this world, and randomly owling Bill might be a bit pretentious.

He had spoken with Charlie briefly, and he was still a bit embarrassed at the state he had been in when they had met, but perhaps through that connection it wouldn't be so strange to be owling Bill.

Harry was really out of his depth. He knew he probably could get around the last ward somehow, but even when he prodded the ward with a small twig, the thing incinerated between his fingers. It was completely sealed off to organic materials.

"Can you break it?" Harry asked curiously. He felt a prickling over his arms and on the backs of his hands. It was uncomfortable.

No, there are contracts... no sacrifice ... unacceptable.

Harry sighed, memorized the location, and apparated back to the gardens outside of St. Mungos. He resolved to write to Charlie. Even if it might be a round about way, Harry didn't know anyone else he could trust to help him deconstruct a ward except Bill. Through his feeble connection with Charlie, he might be able to get a plausible referral, or really an excuse, to write to Bill.

Walking back to the orphanage he discovered he had about an hour before dinner. Quickly, he made his way up to the boys' dormitory and opened his trunk. Inside he found a quill, an inkwell, and a small bit of parchment and used the back of his potions text to write a quick note to Charlie.

He foolishly glanced around for Hedwig, but caught himself. Carefully rolling up the quickly drying letter, Harry tied a string to it and set out to find an owl to borrow. If anything, there was an owlry in St. Mungos.

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As Harry predicted, Charlie had quickly recommended Bill as someone who was knowledgeable about curse breaking, ward breaking, and ward building. He then quickly owled Bill with questions about wards, nothing too specific, and they traded a few correspondences over a few days before Harry decided to ask the rather large favor.

Dear Bill,

I must apologize, for I have not been fully honest with you. I am of the understanding that you work with Albus Dumbledore in some of his endeavors, and because I know this, I feel as if I can trust you with such a task should you choose to take it.

If you think you can meet with me to discuss this matter privately, please owl me back with a time and place.

-Harry

Within the hour an Owl came with Bill's reply.

Leaky Cauldron. 10 pm.

Harry discretely cast a tempus spell.

It was 9:45.

He grabbed his cloak.

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The Leaky Cauldron was dimly lit, and as Harry walked into the early night bar scene, he felt acutely aware of his age appearance. Tom's Bar was a known gate between the muggle and magical worlds, but it was still a bar that on late nights drew an older crowd.

Harry did his best to ignore the stares and glanced about for Bill's familiar red hair. Harry finally spotted him over by the hearth sitting rather improperly in an armchair with his feet crossed and raised up on a low table.

He looked comfortable and was dangling a glass of scotch in his fingers while he perused a magazine that originated from the large pile stacked on the low table.

"Bill Weasley?" Harry stepped into his line of vision.

"Can I help you?" Bill glanced up from his reading material.

"I'm Harry." He introduced himself and held out a hand smiling at the somewhat stunned reaction he received.

"I guess you never did say how old you were." He blinked and set the magazine on the table. Bill didn't take the hand and Harry allowed his to drop without much disappointment. "I thought... well, you aren't having one on me are you?"

"No. I do seriously need your help if you would give it." Harry quickly began his explanation, "I could not write the exact nature of my request in a letter. In fact, we should relocate to a more private location. You may choose."

"Look, Harry, I'm not sure what this is about. But if my brothers Fred and George-,"

"This is not a joke or a hoax. I'm serious, and I need help. You are one of the only people I know that I can trust with this information."

There was a moment of silence where Bill stared at Harry, watching for any sign of deception. Then, reluctantly he nodded and stood.

"All right, let's go outside, and I'll apparate us to a private location." Bill led the way out of the Leaky Cauldron, and Harry let Bill take his hand.

They apparated.

Looking about, Harry recognized the insides of the shrieking shack.

"It will do." Harry muttered.

"Now, if this isn't a joke, and you are serious, you had better start telling me exactly what it is you need from me."

"I am in need of your expertise in ward deconstruction. There is something very dark and very evil I must destroy, but there is a powerful ward in the way, and I am unfamiliar with how to get past it. I believe I could force my way through, but I fear there are secondary consequences that I can't afford." Harry tried to explain what he felt about the magic surrounding the cottage, but it was difficult because he didn't fully understand it.

"Just what sort of dark and evil are we talking here? Maybe you should be reporting this to the Ministry. Maybe we should discuss this with Albus Dumbledore."

"I'll not dare to involve the ministry in this, otherwise Voldemort will certainly become aware of my plan." Bill flinched at the name, but Harry continued. "You may tell Dumbledore, for all I know you must. He will be wise enough to mention nothing to the ministry. Though I'd prefer his not knowing... But I'll leave that up to you. I am in no way affiliated with the Order, but in this effort I'm working to help your cause. I must break this ward, one way or another."

"What is the ward protecting?"

"A piece of the Dark Lord's soul, and I have to destroy it. But I must destroy it secretly without him knowing."

"I'm not sure I can help you." Bill looked a bit skeptical, "You'll have to forgive me, but I'm not in the habit of believing everything that comes out of a thirteen-year-old's mouth."

"Fourteen." Harry scowled, but he was really older than that, "And what can I say to make you believe me? I know of no other person I could possibly trust-,"

"Why not ask Dumbledore?" Bill suggested.

"Why not?" Harry scoffed. "The man would insist if not outright demand something in return that I could not possibly give."

"What makes you think I'd do this for free?" Bill folded his arms and looked down at Harry's small frame.

"Well," Harry was a bit taken aback, "What do you want?" But as the words tumbled out of his mouth, Harry began to fully appreciate his situation. It was stupid for Harry to think he had any leeway with Bill. He foolishly forgot that this Bill was not the Bill he knew and was certainly under no feelings of family obligation to help Harry. He wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived, and he wasn't even a very close friend. In fact, in this world, Harry Potter had likely never even visited the Weasley household. There was no link and no tie that might win his regard.

Harry stepped back as a wave of vertigo descended upon him, making it seem as if the ground shifted beneath his feet. Anxiety and isolation threatened to overwhelm him as the realizations he had been ignoring or setting aside came rolling into the forefront of his thoughts. His friends were not his friends. They didn't know him. He had no one he could fully trust. He had no true friends, just acquaintances, and most of them were... well, fourteen and young, and they couldn't know any of it. Nothing. He could tell them nothing or it would ruin everything. There would be too many variables to track, and if the changes he made deviated too far from his original world's events, his predictions would be useless, and the disasters that might befall this world...

"I have no one." Harry whispered aloud into the dark and stepped farther back into the shrieking shack and away from Bill. "I'm sorry. I should not have bothered. I realize that now. I have to do this on my own." Harry glanced up at Bill and nodded as if reaffirming something. "Thank you for coming, I apologize for my assumptions..." Harry contemplated whether or not he should obliviate him.

"Are you quite all right?" Bill asked showing a bit of concern. Harry would feel awful if he had to erase his memory.

"I'm afraid... that I must ask you to tell no one outside of the Order about this. Please promise me that."

"I promise I'll tell no one outside the Order. Will that satisfy you?" Bill asked.

"Swear it, please." Harry swallowed.

"I swear, on my magic, that I will tell no one outside of the Order about what you have told me. Now, tell me, how do you know so much about the Order?"

"Not important. You are of no use. I must find away to get around the ward. It will simply take me more time this way. Any particular references you'd recommend?" Harry asked in a somewhat anxious laugh. He wanted to leave, yet he wanted to stay. He was torn between wanting to believe that he was not so miserably alone and isolated and wanting to leave and isolate himself.

"I think you had better tell me." Bill insisted.

"We owe each other nothing." Harry snapped a bit more viciously than he intended. Biting his lip, he took a breath and calmly revised his statement, "I needn't say anymore to you."

"But you do. It's important." Bill persisted. Harry laughed.

"You can't keep me here." Harry smiled sadly and apparated away.

There had to be some way to break those wards. At least now, he had the time to waste. He could try to study and learn curse breaking and ward building. Harry thought he might be able to learn ward deconstruction and maybe even modification or manipulation.

He would need to wait until he got to Hogwarts, or find a way to make some extra money to buy any required texts he might need.

Maybe he should get a summer job?

Chapter 19: Summer Help

The need for a job wasn't particularly pressing, but Harry didn't know for certain what his financial situation was. For all he knew, his parents could have been dirt poor, or they could have been just as loaded as they had been in his world. Whether or not he had access to those funds or if he could obtain them somehow, he didn't know. He knew he would need to see someone from Gringotts in the near future, but it couldn't hurt to have an actual job. At least it would keep him busy, and maybe he could pretend he was normal for a little while.

Maybe, he just really wanted to keep himself occupied outside of politics, Voldemort, and being a student again. The truth was that he hated being idle, and the orphanage felt like one great big place for waiting. At the Dursleys he always had a mountain of chores to do and didn't have much free time. Now that he was rid of them, he found the mindless work actually had helped him keep his head clear of anxious thoughts about the future.

Harry found himself behind Madame Malkin's Robes for All Occasions. He was continually surprised and, of course, grateful that the staff at the orphanage had decided to ignore his comings and goings. They never questioned where he went or even seemed to care. There were times where he'd receive suspicious glances from a few of the older staff members and even from some of the children; however, no one asked about his routine.

Thus, he decided there wouldn't be much of a problem getting a part time job somewhere in Diagon Alley.

That was, if anyone was hiring.

Harry knew next to nothing about making robes, so he skimmed his gaze along the line of shops and decided to try his luck as Flourish and Blotts.

Maybe he could work out a deal, being paid in books.

Harry entered the bookstore. It wasn't very busy, being a Tuesday during lunch, but there were a few customers meandering about the shelves. Behind the counter was the shop owner. Harry couldn't

recall if he had ever had any hired help but he figured it couldn't hurt to ask.

"Hello sir." Harry stood to the side of the register.

"Can I help you with something, son?"

"Well, maybe." Harry smiled with what he hoped was a winning smile. He really didn't have much experience with obtaining a job. This would be his first outside of being the wizarding world's savior. "I'm looking for work, just something to keep me busy and maybe earn some extra pocket money. Do you think you might need any help around the store?"

Harry could tell as soon as the store owner comprehended what he was asking that the answer was no. He could see it as the man's brows drew together, his mouth pressed into a firm line. The man let out a breath before beginning an apologetic list of excuses why he didn't hire out.

Harry didn't really care to listen to the book keeper's long winded platitudes and apologies. Not wanting to waste the time, he held up his hand and interrupted him.

"Don't worry about it sir. I thought I'd try my luck, and I see it's not here. Thanks for your time." And with that he exited the shop.

He tried three more places with little success. As he was about to give up and go back to the orphanage, he was stopped in his tracks when a man hovering a line of crates cut in front of him. He was about to complain, but the man looked hurried and drained, as if he were straining with the effort of maintaining the charms.

There was quite a long train. Maybe twenty larger crates floated behind him towards the Magical Menagerie.

The man was muttering to himself, and Harry felt the moment when he became distracted and lost his hold on about half of the crates. They dropped to the ground, some producing startled yelping noises, other's angry hissing. Four of the crates tipped over, and the frames splintered, allowing several animals to escape.

Three black kneazles and one brown and orange striped half-breed squeezed through a small gap between the dislodged frames. From another crate escaped several snakes that slithered and snapped at passersby, hissing insults that would have made Mrs. Weasley blush.

Frogs and toads croaked their distress from another crate, but they did not dare escape while the snakes were roaming so freely.

It came as a surprise when the four kneazles turned their large ears in his direction and stared at him. One called out to him, thin tail swaying and flicking from side to side in a careless fashion. As interesting as the cat-like creatures were, the snakes seemed to be the most dangerous of the escapees and with their angry hissing Harry's attention returned to the slippery creatures gliding quickly over the ground.

Without much thought he took a step forward and daringly grasped one of the snakes behind the head. It thrashed and spit insults but was immediately hushed when Harry quietly hissed for compliance.

"Careful young man! Some of those are venomous!" the man set down the other crates out of necessity, causing many people to begin complaining about them being in the way. Harry watched as the man cast spell over the general area so that none of the animals could wonder around the alley any further. He then attempted to summon the kneazles, which ducked and dodged his spells. It looked like they were having fun. One of the black kneazles scuttled over to Harry and leaped deftly onto his shoulder.

Harry grinned and scratched the creature behind the ears and was rewarded with something like a purr. Again, he whispered softly to the snake.

'Tell the others to come to me. I am warm, and I will keep them safe.' The hissing was so soft that Harry doubted anyone would notice.

The snake did as it was told, and Harry gently let the snake slither out of his grip and onto his unoccupied shoulder. The first kneazle yowled to the others, then, it bumped its head against Harry's. Jealous, the other kneazles also sauntered over demanding attention. Finding himself covered in kneazles and snakes, Harry

couldn't help but laugh as their sliding bodies and small feet tickled him. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a snake slide up his calf and curl around his knee.

"Well aren't you a regular charmer?" the man rounded up a few ferret-looking animals, one of which thought to run for Harry. It was stopped, however, by the threat of the large snake that was curling about his waist and twisting over his right leg. Harry was also a bit surprised when a bat suddenly buried itself in his hair.

"It's kind of heavy." Harry said a bit bewildered. He had never been so... surrounded by magical animals.

"If uh... it wouldn't be so much trouble, do you think you could help me get these guys inside?" the man asked hopefully.

"Sure." Harry thought about how he was going to move.

"Just be careful not to startle the snakes. A few of them are poisonous; though, they seem to like you well enough. You a Slytherin by chance?" The man joked.

"Hufflepuff actually," Harry would have shrugged, but his shoulders were weighed down. Shifting the large snake's body further up on his torso, he followed the man into the Magical Menagerie and helped the owner by placing them in separate cages and tanks. While the man was out side moving the rest of the crates into the store, Harry occupied himself with convincing the bat to let go of his hair.

"Phew!" the man wiped his brow. "Thanks for your help son. I thought for sure I could handle all those boxes on my own. Looks like I was wrong. Thank Merlin's boots you were there. Have you ever thought about working with animals? They seem to have an unnatural affinity for you."

"Ah... no actually. I've never really been around very many magical creatures." Harry shrugged. Most of the creatures Harry had dealt with were out to harm, maim, and/or kill him. And other than Hedwig and the occasional garden snake, Harry hadn't really enjoyed the encounters.

"That's a shame. You'd be really good at it. I can tell. If you're even looking for a bit of work, I could certainly use your help. I've never seen anyone so good at handling snakes. Don't much like 'em myself." Harry's ears perked up. He couldn't believe his luck.

"Actually... I have been looking around for a part time job. If you could really use the help, I'd be grateful, even for a small wage."

"What's your name son?"

"Harry Potter." Harry smiled and offered his hand.

"I'm Doyle Spencer. I've been running this place by myself for a while, and my last employee quit about two weeks ago. This isn't an easy job, but I think with your abilities, you shouldn't have any problems. When can you start?"

XXXXX

Harry considered himself quite fortunate to have been given the opportunity to work for the Magical Menagerie, which doubled as a pet store and a veterinary clinic or animal hospital. Spencer knew his information on animals and was a decent business man. He could tell when an animal was under too much stress, or was being under or over fed, if it was sick, or even if it just had a bad temperament.

Harry had stayed for a few hours for some job training and had seen that despite the man's expertise, the animals didn't much like him.

Harry himself had never had any problems with animals, the exception being his Aunt Marge's dog. Ripper was a vicious animal, inbred and unhappy, and like his master, a real bitch that reveled in the suffering of others.

In his Care of Magical Creature's classes, the animals weren't usually violent unless provoked. Buckbeak had certainly liked him. But he never remembered kneazles liking him so much, or rats which he didn't like at all, or the bats, which liked to hang on his shirt or in his hair.

Spencer said he probably had good pheromones. But Harry didn't know what that meant.

XXXXX

After almost a week and a half, the only thing Harry didn't much care for about his new job was that he started at ungodly hours in the morning. He was expected to show up at 6:30 and open the shop at 7:00. The hours were long, but Spencer gave him long breaks to make up for it. Some days were shorter, and some were longer, but he was usually out by no later than 3:00 in the after noon.

It came as quite a surprise when Dolores Umbridge came bustling into the shop at exactly 7:01, heaving and huffing, whilst carrying the most pathetic excuse of an animal Harry had ever seen.

"This is an emergency!" She practically wailed to him, thrusting the white Persian cat into his arm. "Mr. Tibbidy is not feeling well. What's wrong with him?"

Harry remained impassive in response to her emotional hysterics. The animal, he admitted, looked agitated, stressed, and probably wasn't eating properly. Its stomach looked bloated compared to the rest of the body, and there were small bald patches of fur here and there. The cat was most definitely feeling ill.

Then again, living under the tender care of Dolores Umbridge could make anyone sick and jittery. He remembered all the horrible things she had done to Hogwarts and wasn't in the most forgiving mood.

"I am sure we can find out. Won't you have a seat?" Harry directed her to the waiting bench next to the snake tanks.

"Please help Mr. Tibbidy!" She looked about ready to burst into tears. Harry vindictively thought of telling her that Mr. Tibbidy wasn't going to make it if only to see if he could make her cry.

"Take a seat." He repeated, and took Mr. Tibbidy into the back room. The cat visibly calmed as he carefully lifted it onto the exam table stroking it gently. Harry then grabbed a clipboard and started recording his observations, taking the cat's weight down, and discovering, much to his annoyance that Mr. Tibbidy was, in fact, a Ms. Tibbidy. He felt the beginnings of a headache surfacing rapidly.

When Doyle came in, Harry sighed and handed him the clip board before grabbing a second one.

"This is Mr. Tibbidy," Harry said emphasizing the Mr., "She seems stressed. I think I'll leave her diagnosis to your professional capabilities while I gather some important patient and owner information."

Doyle snorted and began to poke and prod at Mr. Tibbidy while Harry walked back into the front room where Dolores chewed worriedly on a hanky.

"Ms..."

"Umbridge," She sat up straighter looking about as stressed and haggard as her pet.

"I have a few questions for you-,"

"Is my baby all right? Will you fix him?"

"How long have you owned Mr. Tibbidy?" Harry ignored her.

"I've had him for about four years."

"Is Mr. Tibbidy an out door cat or an indoor cat?"

"Normally indoor, but sometimes, he gets out. He's a very clever cat. But I usually catch him before he gets far." She beamed. Harry refrained from rolling his eyes, thinking the cat probably wanted nothing more than to escape.

"Has Mr. Tibbidy had any previous health issues?" Harry continued with the interview wishing he could claw the skin from her toady face. When he finished, finally, he returned to the backroom and gave the second clipboard to the actual doctor.

"She is pregnant." He said.

"Somehow... that doesn't surprise me." Harry rubbed his temples.
"You wanna tell her?"

"Why would I do that unpleasant task?"

"I thought so..." Harry sighed and trudged back out to give Delores the news.

"What do you mean, pregnant?" She asked shrilly, "He's-,"

"A she," Harry tried to envision himself as the epitome of patience. "She's malnourished and needs to be fed more than you've been feeding her to maintain proper health."

"I thought he-, I thought she needed to go on a diet!" Dolores looked horrified.

Harry wanted to shake the woman.

XXXXX

After Dolores left with Mr. Tibbity, he started organizing the paperwork. This was also a somewhat boring but necessary part of his job, but once that was done, he could get on to feeding the animals and making sure they were comfortable.

It startled him a little when a delivery owl tapped on the shop window, demanding entrance. Quickly, Harry went to the door to let in the large bird. It flapped its wings silently, dropping the daily prophet on the front desk. There was an owl perch next to the front desk, but the owl ignored it in favor of landing on Harry. It seemed like the bird was determined to use him as a perch whether he liked it or not, so he raised his bare arm and felt the sharp talons close around his wrist. Luckily they didn't break the skin while the owl took a moment to find its balance.

"I suppose you'll want a treat and payment?" Harry asked the preening owl. It hooted in what he supposed was affirmation. There was a jar of knuts under the desk and he grabbed a few and slipped them into a small pouch tied to the owl's leg. Next to the jar was another jar of owl treats and he offered one to the owl who took it and nibbled affectionately on his ear before swooping out the open door.

It reminded Harry of Hedwig. He missed her presence like he missed spending the last half of the summer at the Weasleys.

Grabbing the Prophet, he glanced across the front page headline: Dementor Attacks the Boy Who Lived! Neville's pale face was emblazoned across the front page holding a cup of tea and a chocolate bar while his grandmother looked on angrily in the background.

Harry briefly scanned the article, a shiver of remembrance creeping up his spine. He recalled the cold dead feeling that overcame him in the presence of those wraith-like creatures. The battlefield had been overrun by them, pockets of cold hopelessness searching for souls to devour.

The article stated that Neville had been attacked while on a walk near his grandmother's house, where he lived during the summer holidays. Augusta Longbottom had glanced at her family clock while she was taking tea in the family room and saw Neville's clock hand was positioned on 'imminent danger.' She had used a 'point me' spell and came upon the scene of her grandson facing off against a dementor. Nothing else was really stated.

To Harry's mild annoyance the article didn't mention many details. When he had been in the limelight, the articles written about him almost always made him out to be some helpless little boy, incapable of standing up to such a dark and loathsome creature. It had always been a sore spot that he hadn't had the composure to stay conscious the first time he experienced the presence of a dementor. Remus had said it was because he had a lot of bad memories, but somehow he always felt like it was because he was somehow weaker.

Glancing at the date, he saw it was the 27th of July. 'It must have happened yesterday' he thought to himself. Whatever had actually happened Harry was glad Neville was okay. There was nothing pleasant about confronting a creature like a dementor. In his world, the attack had taken place in early August, so things were still happening relatively close to what he expected.

XXXXX

Harry was surprised by the number of owls on his bed when he arrived home after work.

There was an official looking owl that was from Gringotts. The letter informed him of an appointment to see a banking advisor about the Potter account on Wednesday the 28th, in other words, tomorrow. The second owl was from Draco informing him of his summer activities. Bored, Harry set it aside to read the third owl which had a note from Professor Sprout.

He opened it while the other two owls flew off.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I'm sending this letter out to remind you that fifth year is an important year in which you will be taking your Ordinary Wizarding Levels. They will be held at the end of the year and will contain both practical and theoretical portions graded O through T. If you have any questions regarding the tests please send an owl.

I trust your summer is going well.

Best wishes,

Pomona Sprout

P.S. Professor McGonagall has mentioned to me your improvement in transfiguration, and I have looked over your grades for other classes and would like to congratulate you on your hard work. If you keep this up I'm sure you will do well on your OWLs.

Harry blinked and set the letter aside, grabbing the last owl's parcel and waved the bird away. The last letter was from Hermione.

Dear Harry,

We found what you were looking for. Neville, Ron and I decided to keep it here until school starts because this is the safest place for now. One of us will let you know if the situation changes.

Sincerely,

Hermione

Harry nodded and incinerated the letter with no more than a thought. No one else was in the room anyway.

Then, he turned back to Sprouts's letter.

He was doing well?

Harry shook his head wondering what it was that had impressed her so much. He certainly hadn't tried very hard in his classes, as the material was boring, and he didn't want to stand out with any sudden improvements. The other Harry was not the sharpest knife in the potions kit, and Harry had anticipated having poor grades. The fact that his lack of trying was an improvement made him wonder again how the other Harry had functioned in the world.

That he had impressed McGonagall was also a surprise, but then again, maybe it shouldn't have been.

Perhaps it was that bird bath he had transfigured, or the paisley print platypus, or... now that he thought about it, his spider...

Harry located his trunk and opened the lid. He was sure he had kept it.

Sure enough, sitting in the very corner of his trunk was a medium sized yellow and black spider sitting on a small and inconspicuous web. Harry wondered briefly how long it had been in that corner.

"You're not a bottle cap." Harry said to it. "How long have you been sitting in the corner of my trunk?"

The spider waved its legs in excited circles. Harry wondered if a transfigured spider needed to eat, then thought that if it did, it was clearly taking care of itself, and if it didn't, then who knew what sustained it.

"What am I going to do with you?" he said out loud.

"Harry!" Edgar came bounding into the room followed closely by his best friend Benjy.

"You're back!" Benjy tried with all his might to tackle Harry but the older wizard hardly budged when Benjy's arms latched around his middle. Seeing that his plan had failed, Benjy took a step back towards Edgar and put his small hands on his hips

"Hey you guys. What's going on?" Harry watched the two boys exchange a glance.

"Where do you always go?" Benjy asked ignoring the first question entirely. Harry took a seat on his bed so he was at eye level with the younger boys.

"Out." Harry said succinctly and shrugged. He knew they were bound to ask eventually, but there was that tiny hope that they would just continue to ignore his frequent comings and goings.

"That's a stupid answer." Edgar complained predictably.

"I can't tell you where I go. It's a secret."

"But you can tell us." Benjy gave a conspiratorial grin.

"No," Harry sighed, "I'm sorry, but I can't."

"Why not?" Edgar's eyes got wide and Harry felt something in him constrict painfully. Why were little kids so darn hard to disappoint?

"That's because..." Harry wanted to come up with a good excuse without lying, "because, if anyone found out, I'd be in a lot of trouble. So, even though I know you wouldn't tell, I have to be careful."

"But you know we won't tell, so why can't we know?"

Harry watched Benjy's face fall in utter disappointment.

"Well, even though I know you won't tell on purpose..." Harry racked his brains to come up with something that would appease them, "Well, what if they used veritaserum?" Not that either of them really knew who 'they' would be except maybe the orphanage staff.

"Ooooh... but what if they use it on you?" Edgar asked.

"I won't get caught." Harry ruffled his hair. "I know you don't like being left out, but I promise it's nothing very exciting. It only seems that way because I can't tell you about it."

"Now?" said Benjy.

"Hm?"

"I mean, you can't tell us now, but maybe later?"

"Maybe later," Harry agreed.

Chapter 20: Moving Right Along

Harry walked into the tall white building of Gringotts and looked for an open teller. The goblin glared at him from behind his desk.

"Yes?" He hissed acidly, as though he couldn't be bothered to spend another moment in his presence.

"I have an appointment. I'd like to speak to someone about my account and see if it would be at all possible to set up another," Harry said politely.

"Name?"

"Harry Potter."

The goblin blinked and snarled before pointing in the direction of another goblin who was weighing an emerald brooch the size of an egg. "Griphook is in charge of the Potter family vault. Griphook!"

The familiar goblin looked up from his weighing.

"The Potter heir wishes to speak with you when you have a moment," The teller yelled across the room.

When Griphook scowled in acknowledgement, the teller continued, "He says he might be interested in opening a new account."

"All right, all right. Come on." Griphook beckoned Harry to follow him farther back behind the teller's counter and into what appeared to be an administrative section.

Griphook took a seat in a goblin sized desk, and Harry was almost glad he had a fourteen-year-old body. An adult would have found it quite uncomfortable to sit in such an awkwardly low chair.

"Alright, what's this about the vault?" The goblin didn't waste time.

"Well, I was wondering if there is a way for me to have access to my family vaults before I come of age? What exactly are my limitations?"

Griphook huffed and pulled open a small drawer. He rummaged through it for a moment and then withdrew an incredibly large folder with the label 'Potter Family' printed on the cover. Looking through it briefly, Griphook removed several sheets of parchment.

"You have a trust fund set up to pay your way through school. You also have a quarterly allowance, totaling 20 Galleons a year for spending, which is set aside for you and available upon request."

"Only 5 Galleons every three months?" Harry sighed. That wasn't as much as he had hoped. "How much is available at the moment?"

Griphook slipped a piece of parchment in front of Harry and pointed to some of the figures.

"Because you haven't been spending much of your allowance, you have accumulated 183 Galleons that are available to you to be withdrawn."

"Well, that's something," He nodded. 183 came out to... about 9 years worth of Galleons that his other self had not used. At least his other self was frugal and saved his money. He probably figured that he would break anything he bought anyway. "Is there a way I can set up a vault to place funds in that can be readily withdrawn? I just started a part time summer job and would like my money in a safe and secure location."

"You need at least 200 Galleons to obtain a vault."

"I see. I have two paychecks to cash as well as the spending money in the other vault." Harry handed over his paychecks to Griphook. "That gives me about 250 Galleons, I think." Griphook looked over the paychecks and nodded.

"251 Galleons, and four Sickles. That is certainly enough to begin a second vault. You are," the goblin glanced at a sheet in the folder, "almost 15, meaning you are still underage. I can only give you a spending account and you won't accrue much interest. You will at least be able to access the full account. When you are 17 you may have access to the full contents of the Potter vault."

"Okay, that works. Thanks,"

"Now for your spending account..." Griphook shuffled his papers around gruffly.

XXXXX

Harry stared at the wards surrounding the Gaunt cottage, shack... thing.

He still wasn't sure how he wanted to try to get in. He tried throwing things through the doorway, but everything incinerated and/or bounced off the wards. He had purchased several books on wards, but having no practical knowledge, no expertise, the task was becoming more frustrating the longer it took to discover what type of ward it was.

Harry could help bring down a ward. His magic had the power, but that's all he was, a power source. He had no idea where to direct the power and his magic was refusing to help.

Purchasing books on wards was almost no help. Most of the logistics of casting and breaking wards dealt with runes and arithmancy, which he had little to no knowledge of.

A sudden cold seeped into his hands and feet, and he felt dizzy. For a moment, Harry was confused. It had been more than a month since his magic had pushed at him, so he didn't realize what was happening until he fell backwards and into the arms of someone familiar.

Dark skin and deep green eyes stared down at him.

Earth.

Harry breathed shallowly and tried to bring his feet under him, but there was another pulling of energy. Another element had chosen to appear and Harry's legs began to fall asleep. The numbing sensation sent painful tingles prickling down to his toes.

He ignored the pin pricks as the other appeared before him, and Harry instantly knew who it was. There was no mistaking the shock of red hair and brilliant yellow eyes.

The last time Fire had appeared before him, it had emerged from fire itself, as an ambiguous human figure, a steady form within the Goblet of Fire's own flame. This being standing before him, of flesh and bone, rather than some reflection of human form, radiated heat. It felt good against his chilled body.

Gently, the arms holding him set him down onto his knees, and Fire stepped forward.

Weakly, Harry tried to curl his fingers around one of Earth's arms, but his muscles couldn't form a proper grip. Skin moved beneath his fingers as the being pulled away.

It was strange, the feeling that came over him as he lost contact. A deep fear gripped at him, and he turned to pull Earth back but only succeeded in falling over at the other's feet.

Fire laughed while Earth again bent to help him into a seated position.

Harry let out a breath of relief as he was pulled back to lean against a tree, Earth's hands never leaving him.

"It's freezing," Harry managed to mutter as another shiver of cold pulled at his body. Looking up, Harry watched as Air latch onto Fire's arm unnoticed or not minded by the latter element.

"Good." Fire's hands traced Harry's jaw line, and the sudden heat against his skin was almost painful. "You are almost there."

"What?" Harry breathed, glancing from Fire to Air, weakly clinging to Earth's cool hand.

"To take so much from you is not wise, but you asked for this, remember. And it is interesting to experience. An indulgence for us is costly for you."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't try this in the orphanage. I would have had a hard time explaining why a bunch of naked people were appearing out of nowhere," Harry swallowed tiredly, amused at the situation.

"Everywhere." Air corrected, tucking long hair behind an ear.

"Trying to communicate to a human has always been difficult. Words are often... unclear," Earth shifted slightly.

"You know... I was trying to figure out how to get by those wards. I feel like you kind of ruined any chance I had at bringing them down today." Harry received a sharp glare from Fire and flinched away. Even though they looked somewhat human, Harry suddenly felt the significance of his mortality in that look.

"Daring boy," Air smirked and gracefully slid up to his side, "your mouth may be your own, but it is also ours. Take care of your words. Or I will take care." Air raised her index finger and drew it across his lips.

He couldn't breathe.

"St..." Harry's hands clutched futilely around his shirt as he tried to draw a breath; he glanced up at Earth to help him, but ultimately, he knew it was pointless.

"I told you already you will not cross those wards. I will not allow it." The three said at once. Harry leaned his head back against the tree trying to keep from passing out. Clouds of grey and black dotted his vision and his head was beginning to pound.

'Please,' he thought desperately, over and over in his head.

Finally Magic relented, and Air placed a small kiss on the corner of his mouth. Oxygen rushed back into his lungs, and he greedily breathed in.

"I'm sorry. I just don't know why you won't let..." Harry trailed off, thinking it was probably better not to finish that statement.

"I will not sacrifice what is mine to allow you to pass it," Earth said gripping Harry's fingers tight enough to cause pain.

"I still don't think I fully understand, so I'm not sure how I can convince you otherwise. But... but I need to take the ring, so I can destroy it." Harry remained tense in the presence of the three, waiting.

"There are ways around it," Earth said quietly, and the rest joined his voice in unison, "But such direct ways must be refused. A ring is not worth the cost, but perhaps..."

"Perhaps, there is something though." Air looked thoughtful, then smirked twirling a strand of hair.

"Will you tell me?" Harry looked up hopefully.

"Rely on your own talents this time, Harry." Air stood and began to fade. The way Air had called his name resonated deeply as though it had been more than said, that there was meaning within the meaning of his name.

"My own talents? But I haven't any clue how to break wards." Harry said desperately to the place Air had been standing a moment ago. He turned only to find his hands empty and the warmth and feeling returning to his fingers and toes. Fire and Earth had also disappeared. "You know," Harry said stretching his limbs a bit gingerly trying to get rid of the tingling, "regular people don't fade out. If they disappear, it's with a popping sound, like when a wizard apparates. If you're trying to be authentic-,"

Harry was cut off by an acorn falling on his head.

"I'm just saying." Harry rubbed the sore spot.

A branch snapped above him and Harry scrambled out of the way.

"Alright, alright." Harry apparated out of the forest.

XXXXX

Harry paced back and forth behind the desk, not entirely concentrating on the job he was supposed to be doing. Instead of documenting the intake of magical creatures and calculating a list of costs, Harry was trying to figure out everything he had to take care of in the next few weeks.

Sighing, Harry sat down and stared at the registry in front of him.

There was a tickling sensation on the back of his scalp and he reached his hand back and was surprised to discover his yellow spider crawling onto his fingers and over his hand.

He watched the spider make its way along his arm and he continued his contemplation. He had set up a muggle P.O. box in London and had received a short letter from Alex saying everything was set and that the coin was active. Harry would be attempting to portkey across the world in the near future and was a bit nervous.

He also needed to do his school shopping. He had discovered that the orphanage would be taking care of the majority of his school necessities, such as books and potions ingredients. Ari had mentioned wanting to buy a few extra rolls of parchment and a silver cutting knife for potions, but he would be getting the standard supplies like they got every year, apparently. He thought he might still go shopping for extra things, but he wanted to see what the orphanage selected out for him before he made up his list for additional supplies.

The door chimed and Harry looked up to find a surprised Millicent Bulstrode.

"Hi Harry." She stepped into the shop followed by what could only be her father.

A Death Eater. Harry's eyes narrowed.

"Hello." Millicent's father held a small kennel and out of one of the holes Harry spotted a bright yellow eye belonging to a cat that looked remarkably familiar.

That's when he remembered Hermione grabbing cat hair off of Millicent's clothes by mistake. So this was the cat.

"How can I help you?" Harry stood and shut the registry book gladly.

"We're here for a check-up." Millicent took the kennel from her father and set it up on the counter. The cat backed into a corner of the travel carrier and blinked owlshly at Harry.

"What's its name?" Harry tried making conversation while grabbing a second book for appointments. He flipped it open and saw

highlighted in bright purple the name Bulstrode and next to it, was a brief summery of the cat including: the name, age, weight, and medical history.

"Striker," Millicent said, wiggling a finger in the cage trying to comfort the timid cat.

"I take it he doesn't like these visits?" Harry slowly opened the kennel and let his hand pause at the entrance.

"Careful, he's called Striker for a reason." Millicent smirked. Out of the corner of his eye Harry watched Mr. Bulstrode frown in slight disappointment. The frown only deepened when Striker carefully sniffed at Harry's hand, then bumped into it demanding to be pet.

"He seems like a good cat." Harry smirked up at the Death Eater, "You can either wait here or you can come to the examination room."

"It's your cat," The man said to Millicent and went to sit in the waiting area.

"Come on Striker." Millicent said, picking up the cat and following Harry into the examination room. "What's with the job?" Millicent asked when the door was closed.

"Summer is a good time to work and earn some extra money." Harry shrugged. "I'll be right back. The actual professional is in the back trying to run diagnostics on a sick owl."

Harry peeked into the back room, one of seven back rooms that occasionally changed depending on the day.

"Hey, got an appointment for you. Black cat. Looks like it'll be quick."

"If you want to look at the teeth and claws, I should be there by the time you're done." Doyle waved him away. Harry rolled his eyes. He had often been given the task to look at the teeth and other sharp and possibly harmful attributes the animals might possess. Harry had yet to be bitten or scratched by an animal, and Doyle had no qualms about exploiting the fact that animals really seemed to like him.

Harry went back to the examination room and coaxed Striker's mouth open. A bit perturbed, the cat complied and shook its head when Harry was done.

"Pansy said she owed you earlier this summer about some things that were happening in the Ministry," Millicent watched her cat lay down while Harry looked at the claws. "It turns out that the new Defense teacher is going to be Ministry appointed."

Harry paused and thought of Umbridge who came in a week or so ago.

"I see." Harry gave Striker a rubdown and the cat purred in contentment. "I believe her name is Dolores Umbridge. From what we can gather, she's easy to manipulate, but we also think she was appointed by the Ministry to watch Dumbledore. They seem to think he's up to something involving the boy-who-lived."

Harry blinked, reminding himself that she was talking about Neville.

"Alright." He nodded.

"You don't seem to be taking this all that seriously," She observed.

"Should I be?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because she's someone in power. And she's an idiot."

"Is she someone that needs to be protected?" Harry asked.

"No but-,"

"Then right now, she's no concern of mine."

Just then, Doyle walked in, and the conversation halted.

Harry didn't like Umbridge, and he certainly wasn't going to take shit from her this year, but his focus was protecting people from Voldemort, not that toad woman.

Then again, Harry recalled the blood quill she had used in his detention. Maybe she was worth watching... He wondered if he had any connections in the Ministry that would know about blood quills and whether or not they were classified as dark objects.

He considered Mr. Weasley, but that was out of the question. After the disaster with Bill, Harry didn't really want to ask. And because Bill and Mr. Weasley were part of the Order, they no doubt had him on their radar.

Who else did he know?

"Harry, would you take these notes and file them for me?" Doyle pointed to a small sheet of parchment on the side table that was being scribbled over by a quill that was probably a lot like Rita Skeeter's. With a flourish, the quill finished its line, and Harry waved goodbye to Millicent, who gave him a look as if to say 'this isn't over.' Grabbing the parchment, he left through the door leading to the front room with all the animals that were for sale.

Who did he know in the Ministry?

"Almost done back there?" Mr. Bulstrode asked from his seat next to a pile of kneezle food.

"Almost," Harry nodded and filed away the parchment. He suddenly jumped a little as his spider tickled its way across his stomach under his shirt. Weird spider, he thought.

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Once outside, he realized there was some sort of festival going on. A lot of the stores were having special sales, and there was even a band playing outside of Gambol & Japes.

"What on earth is going on?" He muttered to himself. Glancing around for some kind of clue, he saw a sign in front of the cauldron shop that said: 'All Cauldrons 30% off July 30th Only! Happy Birthday Neville!'

Harry blinked, then, looked around again. All this for the boy-who-lived? At first he was a little peeved, but of course, after second

thoughts, he realized how annoying all this would have been. On the Brightside, if Flourish and Blotts had a special sale going on, he could afford to look for some beginner's books on arithmancy and runes.

"Harry!" someone called from behind him. He turned and found Wayne Hopkins running up to meet him.

"Hey." Harry greeted him with a little less enthusiasm.

"What are you up to?" the Hufflepuff asked.

"I was on my way home, but I thought I should maybe take advantage of these sales." Harry shrugged, jerking a little when he felt the spider creep along his side. It had been crawling around on him all day, and though he didn't really mind it, occasionally it caused him to jump when it crawled over a particularly sensitive spot.

"Oh, that's cool I guess. A few of us are having some ice-cream over at Florean Fortescue's. You wanna come?"

"Erm... sure." Harry glanced behind Wayne and saw a group of Hufflepuffs from his year enjoying ice-cream at a few tables pushed together.

"I'll buy for ya, since it's your birthday tomorrow." He pulled Harry along behind him towards the table.

"Oh... I suppose it is, isn't it." Harry frowned. Since when had he forgotten about his birthday?

"Heh, don't tell me you forgot your own birthday," Wayne joked.

"Guess I've been a bit busy," Harry trailed off as they walked up to the group of Hufflepuffs.

"You're not serious?" the boy asked in amused disbelief.

"Not serious about what?" Hannah Abbot asked glancing from Wayne to Harry.

"Hi Harry. What're you doing here?" Harry just shifted uncomfortably. He was a little miffed at the Hufflepuffs for essentially abandoning him throughout the last school year.

"Can you believe he forgot his own birthday was tomorrow?" Wayne laughed loudly, "Hey, what flavor do you want?"

"Um, mint chocolate chip?"

"Got it." Wayne left him to go buy the ice-cream. Other than Hannah, there was Susan, Megan, Justin, and Ernie. Harry shifted awkwardly, wondering what he was supposed to say.

"Well, sit down, Harry," Susan ordered, though her tone betrayed a little insecurity. Harry slowly took a seat and waited.

"Listen, Harry... I'm sorry, no we are sorry, about last year." Justin said quietly, "We didn't treat you like... a housemate."

"Or a friend." Susan added.

"It's fine." Harry glanced over to where Wayne was ordering. "I'm used to that sort of thing." He shrugged.

"Oh." Hannah stared at her ice-cream, "So, um, what've you been doing this summer, Harry?"

"Working." He shrugged again, wondering if the awkwardness would go away any time soon. He didn't really know these people. They weren't Ron or Hermione, but then again, the Ron and Hermione from this world were different from the Ron and Hermione from his. His meeting with Bill had proven that point again, reiterating just how alone he really was.

"Where are you working?" Ernie asked.

"The Magical Menagerie." Harry blinked as Wayne held the requested ice-cream under his nose. Carefully, he took the cold treat. "Thank you."

"So... how do you think you'll do on your OWLs? I just got the letter a few days ago." Megan smiled sweetly, licking her ice-cream cone. "I know I'll fail potions."

"What ever happens, happens, I guess." Harry liked eating his ice-cream in bites and bit a large portion off the top.

"You sound so nonchalant," Susan sounded a little irritated, "School hasn't even started and already my mother is lecturing me about how important OWLs are.

"My parents too," Megan agreed, "They can be so annoying. I wish they'd leave me alone sometimes."

"At least you have parents." Harry sighed.

"Oh! Sorry Harry, I didn't mean it like that." Megan apologized quickly.

"I know you didn't."

"Sheesh, way to go, big mouth." Ernie grinned teasingly at Megan.

"No, I'm really sorry. I wasn't even thinking."

Not really hungry, Harry set aside his ice-cream.

"So, Susan, do you know who the new DADA professor is going to be?" Wayne asked, changing the subject.

"Why would I know?"

"Because your aunt works for the Ministry?"

"She's Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. She's not involved with Hogwarts professors." Susan rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, well, with the way things have been going, maybe she should be," Wayne replied in kind.

Harry was suddenly struck by an idea.

"Hey Susan?" He began, wondering if this idea would even work. "Your aunt knows a lot about laws, right?"

"Well, I'd hope so," She huffed, half amused, half exasperated.

"Can you ask-," He paused, trying to figure out how to word it right. "Would it be possible to get a list of objects classified as dark? Or maybe a written statute with a definition of what the Ministry considers as dark objects?"

"Why'd you want to know that?" She asked suspiciously.

"Probably for that 'secret' club thing he runs behind our backs," Wayne laughed as Harry frowned. "Maybe he wants to know what he can get away with."

"Imagine Harry running a secret club against You-Know-Who and Dumbledore," Ernie sniggered along with Wayne. "Who could believe that Skeeter woman? What potion was she on?"

Harry remembered the article and how the other Hufflepuffs had asked if he was seriously the leader of a secret organization. They had been joking, of course, though he never denied it. Some of them had even considered the possibility that he had been, in fact, serious. Hell, he even admitted it out loud, but it seemed as if over time they had convinced themselves that the idea was ridiculous.

"I'd like to know because I have a feeling that the knowledge will come in handy." Harry ignored the other boys in favor of listening to Susan's answer.

"Well, I guess she could send me a copy of any laws pertaining to that," Susan said thoughtfully, "Though I'm sure you could look through the law books at the public library. Hogwarts has copies too, I think."

"How many books are there?" Harry wondered, knowing there had to be a lot.

"Oh... I see your point. There's somewhere around a hundred volumes, and a lot of the laws have been altered or invalidated. They keep record in the books, crossing out old laws instead of deleting them. Some books are filled with nothing but text with lines through them."

"Even if she could point me in the right direction, I'd be grateful. I'm not Hermione Granger. I can't just sit down and read a hundred books." Harry looked at her with pleading eyes.

"I'm sure she'd be happy to help."

Chapter 21: Know-It-All

At breakfast, Harry pushed his waffles around on his plate. It was his birthday today, and the only thing he had received was well-wishing from the orphanage staff and yesterday's ice cream cone from Wayne. He didn't mind the lack of presents, but he missed the yearly birthday letters from Ron and Hermione.

It was getting ridiculous. Every time he thought about them and how things had been, he got depressed. He needed to snap out of it.

Across from him, Ari glanced up, eyes following the path of an owl. Harry was a little surprised when the owl dropped its cargo right above him, and had it not been for his seeker reflexes, the envelope would have ended up in a puddle of syrup.

Across the envelope was his name, written with emerald green ink in a very familiar script. He knew Dumbledore's handwriting as well as he knew his own, but what he was writing for was a mystery. Somehow, Harry doubted it had much to do with his fifteenth birthday.

It wasn't nearly as exciting the second time.

Dear Mr. Potter,

I trust you are staying out of trouble and enjoying your summer holiday.

It is my pleasure to inform you that your Triwizard earnings of 500 Galleons will be delivered shortly.

The officials debated on the award and finally agreed to divide the prize money between Mr. Longbottom and yourself.

Oh, and I do believe it is your birthday today. Just in time then. Congratulations.

Sincerely,
Albus Dumbledore

Harry blinked. 500 Galleons?

"Oh yeah... I forgot." He frowned, "I gave it all away last time."

"Gave what all away? What's the letter say?" Ari said around a mouthful of waffles.

"Oh sorry... uh, I was just thinking out loud. The letter was just from Dumbledore informing me about my prize money."

"Prize money?"

"The tournament. I won, remember?"

"Yeah, you and Neville. Well, how much do you get?"

"500 Galleons." Harry grinned a little at the face Ari made.

"That's a lot! What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm... not sure yet." Harry refolded the letter. How exactly was he going to deal with this? Last time he had given the full winnings to the Weasley twins. Did he keep it and send it to Alex in Australia or give it to the twins again? Would they even accept it?

Harry wondered how much the twins would need. They had lost all their money to Bagman in his world. He hadn't really been paying attention to whether the same thing had happened in this world. Did Neville give them any of his prize money?

On one hand, he needed money for his group, but on the other, Fred and George's Joke Shop had been a solid investment. With the extra funds, the twins had been able to create a bunch of items that were useful to the war effort, and their prank snacks never failed to put a smile on his face.

But then, there was the niggling feeling, the thought that maybe the twins weren't quite the same as the Weasley twins from his world. And even if they still wanted to make the joke shop, would they accept money from him? He wasn't exactly their little brother's best mate anymore.

"Happy Birthday, by the way." Ari placed a small package wrapped in pages of the Prophet on the table in front of him. Harry looked at it for a moment and then carefully began to unwrap it.

"It's from me and Sera. She wanted to thank you for helping out her brother and being there for both of us. Actually, it's mostly from her, since I can't afford anything, but I figured-,"

"You didn't have to get me anything," Harry glanced at Ari with a serious expression. "But... thank you."

Carefully, Harry peeled away the paper, ignoring the moving pictures on the news print. Within the wrapping was a small box, and in the box was a small crystal sphere about the size of a golf ball, and Harry was immediately reminded of Neville's Rememberall.

"Sera said she thought it was a Rememberall when she first grabbed it out of her family vault, and her parents said she could keep it, because that's what they thought it was too." Ari started to explain. Harry reached for the sphere, but his fingers turned cold, and he began to lose feeling in his arm the closer he came to touching it. Harry immediately let his hand drop to his lap, wary of what this present really was. "Sera and I figured out what it was when I went to visit her in Diagon Alley last Sunday. It's a Know-it-all. There're only seven in existence, and apparently, they can store limitless amounts of information." Harry frowned at the supposed Know-it-all, ignoring the tickling of spider legs crawling between his fingers.

"So how does it work?" Harry asked.

"Well, you hold it and ask a question. And the Know-it-all answers. That's how Sera figured out what it was." Ari plucked the Know-it-all from its box and held it. The clear crystal flooded with color, swirling plumes of blue and violet, occasionally mixed with other flashes of color. "So, I can ask something like: what is my name?" Ari addressed the Know-it-all.

"Ariell Oscar Mercius. Preferred name: Ari Mercius." An emotionless, genderless voice stated the requested information with an almost bored tone.

"Here, you try." Ari offered the crystal to him. Harry reached out and accepted the Know-it-all reluctantly. He was somewhat amused as his spider crawled up his sleeve, disappearing into his clothes.

'Weird spider,' he thought.

The crystal in his palm turned from the swirling clouds of blue and purple to a fathomless black. Harry wondered why it changed color. Why did it turn black in his hand?

"Alright, what's my name?"

"Harry Potter" The voice announced. Harry frowned a little, wondering why it had not recited his middle name. He tried again with another question.

"What does the color of a Know-it-all symbolize?" Harry asked.

"Appearance of color symbolizes the attainment of knowledge. The perceived color reflects the type of knowledge recorded. Red symbolizes the recording of written materials, orange symbolizes the recording of atmospheric conditions, such as weather, temperature, time of day, ambient magic, material surroundings, and location. Yellow symbolizes recorded conversations. Green symbolizes the recording of health and well being of other magical and non-magical beings. Blue symbolizes the recording of knowledge of the immediate person past and present occurrences, memories, and perceptions. Violet symbolizes the recording of accessed information." The voice rambled off the colors in succession as though nothing in the world was interesting.

"What does black mean?"

"Black is a non-color shade, lacking hue and brightness, characterized by the absence of light or color-,"

"I mean, why are you, the Know-it-all, black, right now?" Harry glared at the object.

"The Know-it-all is currently unable to record the following: current access of information by immediate person, knowledge of the immediate person, and present conversation. Access of current information already recorded is not impeded. Magical levels of immediate person in contact with the Know-it-all are normal for functioning."

"Then, what is the current temperature?" Harry asked. The sphere flared orange for a moment before returning to a deep and depthless black.

"The current temperature inside is approximately 20 degrees Celsius, 69 degrees Fahrenheit, 530 degrees Rankine, 17 degrees Reaumur, and 294 Kelvins. Temperature readings are rounded to the nearest whole degree. Outside the temperature is-,"

"That's enough." Harry said and was glad when the Know-it-all fell silent.

"That's weird. There really must be something wonky with your magic. How do you get it to not record certain things?" Ari asked.

"I wasn't aware I had done anything." Harry placed the crystal back in its box and watched it turn clear again. "But this is a really interesting gift. Where did you say you got it?"

"The Shawn family vault. Given what you are trying to accomplish, Sera and I thought you could probably find some use for this. So when you have a question to look up, you can use this instead of looking through a bunch of books. I'm not really sure about all the things this can do, but we hope you find it useful."

"Why would either of you give me something so valuable?"

"What you did for us was valuable, and how useful can it really be? I mean, I thought about using it to cheat on tests, but it speaks out loud. You'd have to put up a privacy barrier, which of course the professors wouldn't allow. So it's pretty useless unless you need to look up something."

Harry glanced at the Know-it-all.

No, this was something that was far from useless. This little marble was a gold-mine. Perhaps it had stored within it a wealth of useless and trivial information, but if it could continue to record information, such as conversations or memories, or even another person's physical condition, there was no telling just how valuable and possibly dangerous this thing was. If it fell into the wrong hands, what kind of information could they gain from it?

"Thank you Ari, and pass along my thanks to Sera."

"Sure, no problem," Ari grinned.

Harry was certain that if either Ari or Sera knew exactly what kind of magical object this was, they would have left it in the Shawn family vault, locked away where no one could use it. If they had known how dangerous it was they would have never given it away so carelessly. But because they had given it to him, he would use it to his advantage.

He wasn't an idiot. Even though he recognized the potential danger of such an object, he wasn't about to let that stop him from using it. Knowledge was power, and in this case, it was literally at his finger tips. This was a power he could use.

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Harry pulled out the Know-it-all and held it out in front of him. He stood before the Gaunt Cottage again determined to figure out how to get by the wards.

"Tell me about the wards around this cottage." Harry demanded of the black sphere in his hand.

The Know-it-all flashed orange, and without much of a pause, the orb began a bored monologue of information about the wards.

"The wards are class seven, level four wards placed around the perimeter of the building. Preservation wards are absent. Outer ward is a muggle repellant ward, second set is a ward based off of the principles of the notice-me-not charm and the confundus charm, designed to discourage persons from noticing or comprehending the third and fourth sets. The third set is a corrosive ward designed to prevent living and non-living material from passing through. The fourth set is the original of the class seven wards, requiring a blood offering to pass. The sacrifice is taken and magical signature recorded. Once breached, the castor will know the magical signature of the person letting blood."

"Is there a way to get through the wards?" Harry glared at the little ball of knowledge.

"Breach set three, then make a blood sacrifice to the fourth set."

"How do I breach set three?"

"Find the key stone for the third set, destroy the key stone."

"Well, where is the key stone?" Harry sighed in exasperation as the ball flashed orange again.

"Buried five paces to the immediate person's left, two steps forward. Organic, calcified remains of a snake, type likely non-magical, unable to distinguish species, narrowed down to Alethinophidia infraorder, family Viperidae."

As the Know-it-all continued to rattle off useless facts, Harry followed the instructions and walked five paces to his left, and then, he took two steps forward. Placing the Know-it-all in his robe pocket, the droning voice becoming muffled, Harry switched out for his wand. With a careless wave, he removed the dirt and discovered that the Know-it-all was right. This was almost too easy.

A tangled white and grey serpent-shaped stone coiled around itself, and wrapped around the figure, he could feel a small thread of magic.

Harry flicked his finger, aiming a sharp flare of magic at the fragile strand tied about the snake, assuming it was connected to the third set of wards. The magic tied about the dead snake fizzled into nothing. In the back of his mind, he thought he could hear the distant sound of laughter and was suddenly uncertain if he had done the right thing.

That was when something unexpected happened. The snake that had lain dead was suddenly not dead.

It coiled around to face him and hissed, preparing to strike.

'You, human, dare to cross the Lord of Snakes?' the serpent reared a little, trying to look threatening.

'The Lord of Snakes, you say?' Harry took a step back from the angry snake.

'He summoned me to protect a beloved treasure, for he could trust no other with such a task.'

'While I believe you're an intelligent snake, the Lord of Snakes you speak of has hurt many, many people, and he will keep hurting them. I have to destroy the treasure you guard if he's to be stopped.'

'You are not the world's keeper,' argued the snake, 'but you are something kept. I obey the Lord of Snakes, and you are here to threaten his treasure. Step no further.'

Harry placed his hand over the ground towards the snake.

'Please allow me to pass.' Harry said earnestly. He had no desire to kill the snake, but by the way the snake coiled in warning, he didn't believe he would have a choice.

Building his power, Harry prepared to kill the snake, but just as he was about to release his magic he felt a great pull at the very core of his being. His magic was blocked, refusing to move beyond his fingertips. There came another tug, and Harry suddenly felt tired.

Next to him stood Water, white hair shining in dappled patterns from the sun breaking through the leafy canopy above. Bright blue eyes shifted to his and Harry suddenly felt the need to look away, so he focused on the snake who sat coiling uneasily.

"You should be familiar, I would think, with the rules of sacrifice." Water's voice was cool like soft snow falling despite the summer heat. "If you kill it, the sacrifice will protect the soul inside the ring. You would not be able to destroy it with our help. You would need something like the sword of Gryffindor, though now you are unable to wield it."

"I see." Harry sighed trying to think of a way around the snake. "Can't I just restrain it? Ah, but the Know-it-all said I had to destroy the key stone..."

"It is a good thing you did not destroy it." Water continued. "Pull up your shirt. I will help you because we did make a promise."

"My shirt?" Harry sputtered, "But what's that got to do with-?"

"Harry," Water's voice was suddenly like ice, and Harry hastily pulled his shirt over his head. Water walked around to stand behind him,

and he felt the smallest brush of fingers before Water leaned over his shoulder and presented him with his spider.

"That's the spider I transfigured." Harry stated nervously.

"When we make something alive, it is not as a wizard makes. Do you understand?"

"I'm not sure." Harry watched the spider wave its forelegs at him from the palm of Water's hand.

"We allow you the use of a wand, because you attend a wizard's school, and we allow you wizard acquaintances because as powerful as we are, we are not invincible, and you will need allies despite our grievances. Alone, we can not fulfill our promise."

Harry said nothing, but was curious all the same. What grievances was Water talking about?

"Okay, but I still need the ring." Harry insisted after a pause.

"You are too impatient." Water pinched him sharply on the shoulder before walking over to stand in front of the wards. Harry caught a glimpse of a smile as Water gazed joyfully at the fingers that had pinched his skin. It unnerved him a little.

'What do you think you're doing!' the snake cried slithering to defend its master's treasure.

"You can certainly restrain it now." Water said mildly, watching the snake as it coiled and leapt to bite the bare leg before it.

Harry quickly levitated the snake into the air and held it away from both Water and himself. It hissed insults and twisted valiantly in an attempt to escape, but it was all in vain.

"This one has developed a useful talent of spinning wards." Water carefully set the spider down. "I believe it will be more than content to chew a small hole through the set and retrieve the ring for you."

The wards flickered a little as the spider moved over the net of magic surrounding the cottage, and somehow the spider did not turn

to ash, nor was it repelled away from the wards. It was as if the spider was crawling over thin air.

"I've had that spider for almost a year, and you're just telling me now that it has some sort of crazy ability to eat wards?" Harry said with exasperation.

"We only just noticed when it began weaving wards around you." Water glared at Harry, arms folded close.

"Around me?" Harry looked down at himself, but couldn't detect a thing. "I don't feel anything at all."

"They are not wizard made wards, so I suppose it isn't a surprise you can't sense them. They certainly are useful, however. That Know-it-all is a very dangerous tool, and were you not warded, the knowledge recorded in its library could become a problem."

"I realize that. Is that why it sits black in my hands?" Harry asked. Water nodded and smiled looking ridiculously proud. "So, why exactly did you decide to help me? I thought you, or well Air I guess, wanted me to use 'my own talents' to get the ring."

"We believe you would have been able to figure out a way to get the horcrux on your own, but it may take longer than we have time for, particularly if we allowed you to kill the snake. We made a promise, and your time comes before ours if we are to complete it. It is unusual that we bend to our servant's desires, but that, hopefully, makes a point to you just how valuable you are to us."

'I'm not sure if I like being called a servant.' Harry thought mildly irritated.

Water's eyes flashed knowingly, and Harry flinched a little. He knew they had privy to his thoughts if they chose, but he also knew he couldn't exactly stop thinking.

"It's alright." Water's blue eyes moved from him to the spider, "This is not like it was before. You are very different than those who came before you, and you know almost nothing about what you are. We forgive you under these circumstances. Not even in the beginning did we have any servant quite like you."

'Curse you wretched defiler! Curse you and your keeper! I will go to my Lord and tell him of you! You will not live long, filth!' The snake hissed as the spider carried the large ring over to Water. Water bent and scooped up the spider and the ring.

"This spider certainly loves you. It even spun a small protective ward over the ring. There's quite a nasty curse on it, you know." Water held the ring up to observe it.

"What should I do about the snake?" Harry asked.

"We do not care. So long as you don't kill it."

Harry sighed, warily glancing over to the writhing snake struggling in mid air in a valiant attempt to break free of his magic.

He couldn't just let it go. It was obvious the snake would seek out Voldemort and report the seizure of the ring. Preventing that knowledge from leaking took priority. So, Harry was now stuck with a brainwashed snake, a ward-eating spider, and an orb of limitless knowledge.

How did he get himself into these situations?